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# THE HONOUR OF THE ARMY

AND OTHER STORIES

BY

ÉMILE ZOLA

EDITED WITH A PREFACE BY

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*de*

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## P R E F A C E

THE present volume contains a selection of M. Zola's short stories, most of them written several years ago, and contributed to the pages of a Russian review. They show their author in a variety of moods, and, if some may seem sombre and tragic, the reader will find others of a very different kind, one indeed which is all joviality, whilst another is brimful of quiet humour.

'Le Capitaine Burle,' here called 'The Honour of the Army,' is, I think, the only story by M. Zola in which a duel is described. I cannot recall any example of the kind in any of the twenty volumes of the 'Rougon-Macquart' series which otherwise so faithfully delineate French life in the days of the Second Empire; and the omission is a curious one, for duelling was quite as rife under Napoleon III. as it is under the present Republic. But for those who are interested in M. Zola's personality more interest attaches to 'Le Capitaine Burle' for another reason. It is a story of profligacy and dishonesty—peculation by a regimental officer—such a case, indeed, as unhappily arises from time to time in even the most rigidly regulated services. Curiously enough, however, at the time of M. Zola's participation in the Dreyfus affair, a scurrilous French journalist brought against the great novelist's deceased father the charge

of having embezzled army money at a time when he was said to have been a wardrobe officer of the Foreign Legion in Algeria. The legal proceedings which were instituted by M. Zola in defence of his father's memory long remained in abeyance, and, owing to the Amnesty Law of 1900, M. Zola decided early in the present year (1901) to abandon them altogether.<sup>1</sup> However, apart from a paper written by M. Zola himself on the subject<sup>2</sup> ('L'Aurore,' May 28, 1898), I would mention that the charges against Francesco Zola have been fully dealt with, and disproved, in an instructive little volume by M. Jacques Dhur, entitled 'Le Père d'Émile Zola' (Société Libre d'Édition des Gens de Lettres, 30 Rue Laffitte, Paris, 1898). The little book in question will be valuable hereafter for biographers of the great novelist, when dealing with his parentage.

Now, M. Zola's enemies, who are numerous and also often unscrupulous, have not hesitated to cite his story 'Le Capitaine Burle' as proof of his father's guilt, and of his own knowledge of that guilt. That is to say, he is alleged to have taken his father's transgression as text for his story, changing, of course, localities, names, minor incidents, and even *dénouement*. This allegation is, however, as vile a piece of rascality as ever emanated from the brain of a knave; and the truth would seem to be that some scamp or other, lighting upon 'Le Capitaine Burle' at a moment when the anti-Dreyfusites desired to crush the novelist by fair means or foul, was seized with the inspiration of applying the story to certain

<sup>1</sup> See M. Zola's letter to Maître Labori, dated March 7, 1901, and published a few days later by the Paris press. It is annexed to the later editions of M. Zola's book *La Vérité en Marche* (Paris, E. Fasquelle, 1901).

<sup>2</sup> See M. Zola's *La Vérité en Marche*, p. 235 et seq.

incidents attending Francesco Zola's retirement, not dismissal, from the French army. And it likewise appears certain that forgery of military documents was employed the better to substantiate the tale of parental disgrace, by which it was hoped to crush Émile Zola in his gallant fight for the unfortunate Alfred Dreyfus.

Novelists, nowadays, bring much personal observation and experience into their works; and M. Zola, as is well known, has endeavoured to incorporate in the great majority of his books a vast number of actual facts. Yet I take it that no novelist, having had the misfortune to have a thief for his father, would, for a single instant, think of turning the parental dishonesty into 'copy'—particularly in a manner likely to lead to any identification of the incidents recorded. Rather would he bury deep within him all recollection of such misfortune, and carefully refrain from penning a line likely to recall the stain upon his name. And, so far as M. Zola's father and '*Le Capitaine Burle*' are concerned, the reader may rest assured that there was never any connection between them.

It was virtually my duty to write at some little length on this unpleasant subject; but I will now pass to the other stories given in the present volume. The curious tale called '*The Death of Olivier Bécaille*,' is, in its main lines, a piece of imagination; but when one remembers in what a perfunctory manner the French 'doctors of the dead' for the most part discharge their duties, and how speedily people have to be buried in France—that is, within forty-eight hours of their real or supposed demise—the narrative which M. Zola attributes to one risen from the dead will not be thought at all far-fetched, particularly,

moreover, as the French newspaper press has repeatedly recorded instances of supposed dead men awaking from unconsciousness, at times whilst yet happily in their beds, though at others when already laid in their coffins. Some passages in the tale of Olivier Bécaille's gruesome experiences, those dealing with the unreasoning fear of death which had pursued him through his earlier years, have been amplified by M. Zola, and worked into another of his books, '*La Joie de Vivre*,' the hero of which, Lazare Chanteau, is long shaken by a similar dread. In other respects '*The Death of Olivier Bécaille*' is a story of the '*Enoch Arden*' type. When Olivier comes to life again, and finds his wife gone with another man—a strong, handsome young fellow, beside whom he himself would appear a puny weakling—he is brave enough to waive all claims and lapse into nonentity, without even revealing the fact of his 'resurrection.' With Jacques Damour, the hero of the next story in this volume, matters are different. He, again, although supposed to be dead, turns up and finds his wife in prosperous circumstances, and at first he is inclined to compel her to follow him; but he is stayed at last by the consciousness of his own age and penury, the shame he feels at the sight of her comeliness and cleanliness, and thus he leaves her to the well-to-do tradesman whom she has wedded in his absence. The conclusion of '*Jacques Damour*'—the old man's acceptance of relief from his daughter who is leading a fast life—may be deplored by strict moralists; but then, unfortunately, it is thoroughly Parisian. I have placed this story immediately after '*The Death of Olivier Bécaille*,' because, under different conditions, they both largely deal with the same theme—the return of a husband supposed to be dead.



Of 'The Inundation,' which follows, there is little to be said, except to point out that it is as pathetic as anything that ever came from M. Zola's pen, and that, although written a score of years ago, it shows characteristics which have been more apparent in the novelist's later works, a poetical turn of thought and style, such as one finds in 'Rome,' 'Fruitfulness,' and 'Work.' Some critics have thought it a wonderful change for the 'transcriber of human documents' to have developed into a poet; but all who have studied M. Zola's writings with any attention must be aware that the poetic instinct has really been strong within him since the outset of his career, though for a long time he sought to restrain it.

'Naïs Micoulin,' which follows 'The Inundation' in the present volume, carries us to Provence, long M. Zola's home in boyhood and youth. This is a genuine story of the South, with glimpses of the glowing scenery and the ardent passion of the lands of the sun. In writing it, M. Zola has plainly given rein to his recollections of early, happy days. The atmosphere is virtually the same as that which one finds in various volumes of the 'Rougon-Macquart' series: 'The Fortune of the Rougons,' 'The Conquest of Plassans,' and 'Doctor Pascal.' 'Angeline,' the next story in the book, is probably the slightest in character, as it is also the shortest of the selection. It was written during M. Zola's sojourn in England, at the time of the Dreyfus case, being a commission for a birthday number of 'The Star' newspaper. Although the incidents are laid in France, the 'haunted house,' which suggested the *scenario* of this little sketch, was really one near Walton-on-Thames. Some rather droll stories related about it in that district were epitomized by me in a little

book that I wrote on M. Zola's exile.<sup>1</sup> In striking contrast with 'Angeline' is the story that follows it, 'Nantas,' which, if one passes over some slight improbabilities at the outset, is, in my opinion, one of the strongest short stories ever written by M. Zola. There is sufficient plot in it for a long novel, yet the whole is compressed into less than forty pages. By this example those who are wont to complain of the great length of M. Zola's principal works will see that when he so chooses he can write briefly and crisply, and go straight towards his goal without allowing any incidents on the way, however attractive, to lead him into dissertation.

Next, in 'The Spree at Coqueville,' comes a Rabelaisian debauch, a thoroughly jovial story, which is given here as an answer to those critics who love to assert that Émile Zola is no humorist and cannot even laugh. Two or three years ago an edition of this tale, with some very comical illustrations in colours, was issued in Paris, and came as a surprise to a number of sapient reviewers—both French and English—who, not knowing that the story had been in circulation in another form for more than twenty years, wonderingly inquired whether the dull man had learnt to smile in his old age. But there is more than a smile in 'The Spree at Coqueville,' there is a hearty laugh, of a nature to cheer the dullest, provided that they are not rigid teetotalers. Perhaps, indeed, the 'total abstaining' admirers of 'L'Assommoir' might feel somewhat shocked to find the author of the greatest temperance tract ever written complacently recording the blissful fuddle of a whole village; and, therefore, those of them

<sup>1</sup> *With Zola in England*, by E. A. Vizetelly (Chatto & Windus, 1898).



who take up the present volume may be advised to skip the pages allotted to 'The Spree at Coqueville.'

Humour, though of a much lighter kind, is again apparent throughout 'Madame Neigeon,' the story with which the volume concludes. This is a tale of calf-love and feminine diplomacy, narrated by a somewhat conceited young man; and though, in preparing this version for English readers, I have had to leave aside some of the Gallic salt to be found in the original, the narrative of Monsieur George de Vaugelade's first passion will still be found, I think, an amusing *jeu d'esprit*.

It remains for me to add that the translations of the following stories have been made by various hands; only 'Angeline' and 'Madame Neigeon' being my own work. However, I have in a measure revised all the others in order to secure some continuity of style throughout the volume.

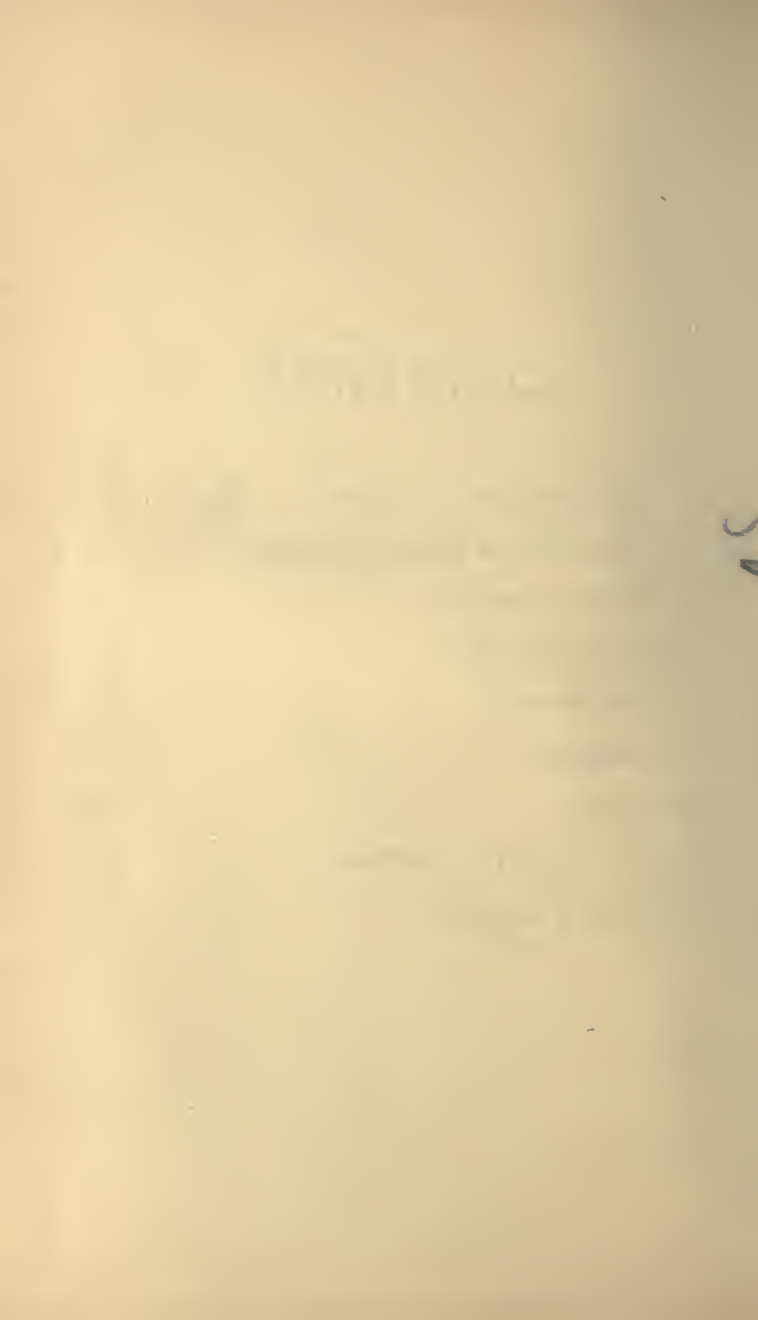
E. A. V.

*Merton, Surrey.*



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# THE HONOUR OF THE ARMY

(LE CAPITAINE BURLE)

## I

It was nine o'clock. The little town of Vauchamp, dark and silent, had just retired to bed amid a chilly November rain. In the Rue des Recollets, one of the narrowest and most deserted streets of the district of Saint-Jean, a single window was still alight on the third floor of an old house, from whose damaged gutters torrents of water were falling into the street. Madame Burle was sitting up before a meagre fire of vine-stocks, while her little grandson Charles pored over his lessons by the pale light of a lamp.

The apartment, rented at one hundred and sixty francs per annum, consisted of four large rooms which it was absolutely impossible to keep warm during the winter. Madame Burle slept in the largest chamber, her son, Captain and Quarter-Master Burle, occupying a somewhat smaller one overlooking the street, while little Charles had his iron cot at the further end of a spacious drawing-room with mildewed hangings, which was never used. The few pieces of furniture belonging to the captain and his mother, furniture of the massive style of the First

Empire, dented and worn by continuous transit from one garrison town to another, almost disappeared from view beneath the lofty ceilings whence darkness fell. The flooring of red-coloured tiles was cold and hard to the feet; before the chairs there were merely a few threadbare little rugs of poverty-stricken aspect; and athwart this desert all the winds of heaven blew through the disjointed doors and windows.

Near the fire-place sat Madame Burle, leaning back in her old yellow velvet arm-chair, and watching the last vine-branch smoke, with that stolid, blank stare of the aged who live within themselves. She would sit thus for whole days together, with her tall figure, her long stern face, and her thin lips that never smiled. The widow of a colonel who had died just as he was on the point of becoming a general, the mother of a captain whom she had followed even in his campaigns, she had acquired a military stiffness of bearing, and had formed for herself a code of honour, duty, and patriotism which kept her rigid, desiccated as it were by the stern application of discipline. She seldom, if ever, complained. When her son had become a widower after five years of married life, she had undertaken the education of little Charles as a matter of course, performing her duties with the severity of a sergeant drilling recruits. She watched over the child, never tolerating the slightest waywardness or irregularity, but compelling him to sit up till midnight when his exercises were not finished, and sitting up herself until he had completed them. Under such implacable despotism Charles, whose constitution was delicate, grew up pale and thin, with beautiful eyes, inordinately large and clear, shining in his white pinched face.

During the long hours of silence, Madame Burle dwelt continuously upon one and the same idea: she had been disappointed in her son. This thought sufficed to occupy

her mind; and under its influence she would live her whole life over again, from the birth of her son whom she had pictured rising amid glory to the highest rank, till she came down to mean and narrow garrison life, the dull monotonous existence of nowadays, that stranding in the post of a quarter-master, from which Burle would never rise, and in which he seemed to sink more and more heavily. And yet his first efforts had filled her with pride, and she had hoped to see her dreams realised. Burle had only just left St. Cyr when he distinguished himself at the battle of Solferino, where he had captured a whole battery of the enemy's artillery with merely a handful of men. For this feat he had won the cross, the papers had recorded his heroism, and he had become known as one of the bravest soldiers in the army. But gradually the hero had grown stout, embedded in flesh, timorous, lazy and satisfied. In 1870, still a captain, he had been made a prisoner in the first encounter; and he returned from Germany quite furious, swearing that he would never be caught fighting again, for it was too absurd. Being prevented from leaving the army as he was incapable of embracing any other profession, he applied for and obtained the position of captain quarter-master, 'a kennel, as he called it, 'in which he would be left to kick the bucket in peace.' That day Madame Burle experienced a great internal disruption. She felt that it was all over, and she ever afterwards preserved a rigid attitude with tightened lips.

A blast of wind shook the Rue des Recollets, and drove the rain angrily against the window-panes. The old lady lifted her eyes from the smoking vine-roots now dying out, to make sure that Charles was not falling asleep over his Latin exercise. This lad, twelve years of age, had become the old lady's supreme hope, the one human being in whom she centred her obstinate yearning



for glory. At first she had hated him with all the loathing she had felt for his mother, a weak and pretty young lace-maker whom the captain had been foolish enough to marry when he found out that she would not listen to his passionate addresses on any other condition. Later on, when the mother had died, and the father had begun to wallow in vice, Madame Burle dreamt again in presence of that little ailing child whom she found it so hard to rear. She wanted to see him robust, so that he might grow into the hero that Burle had declined to be, and for all her cold ruggedness she watched him anxiously, feeling his limbs and instilling courage into his soul. By degrees, blinded by her passionate desires, she imagined that she had at last found the man of the family. The boy, whose temperament was of a gentle, dreamy character, had a physical horror of soldiering, but as he lived in mortal dread of his grandmother, and was extremely shy and submissive, he would echo all she said, and resignedly express his intention of entering the army when he grew up.

Madame Burle observed that the exercise was not progressing. In fact little Charles, overcome by the deafening noise of the storm, was dozing, albeit his pen was between his fingers and his eyes were staring at the paper. The old lady at once struck the edge of the table with her bony hand; whereupon the lad started, opened his dictionary and hurriedly began to turn over the leaves. Then, still preserving silence, his grandmother drew the vine-roots together on the hearth and unsuccessfully attempted to rekindle the fire.

At the time when she had still believed in her son she had sacrificed her small income, which he had squandered in pursuits she dared not investigate. Even now he drained the household; all its resources went to the streets, and it was through him that she lived in penury,



with empty rooms and cold kitchen. She never spoke to him of all those things, for with her sense of discipline he remained the master. Only, at times, she shuddered at the sudden fear that Burle might some day commit some foolish misdeed which would prevent Charles from entering the army.

She was rising up to fetch a fresh piece of wood in the kitchen when a fearful hurricane fell upon the house, making the doors rattle, tearing off a shutter and whirling the water in the broken gutters like a spout against the window. In the midst of the uproar a ring at the bell startled the old lady. Who could it be at such an hour and in such weather? Burle never returned till after midnight, if he came home at all. However, she went to the door. An officer stood before her, dripping with rain and swearing savagely.

‘Hell and thunder!’ he growled, ‘what cursed weather!’

It was Major Laguitte, a brave old soldier who had served under Colonel Burle during Madame Burle’s palmy days. He had started in life as a drummer-boy, and, thanks to his courage rather than his intellect, had attained to the command of a battalion, when a painful infirmity—the contraction of the muscles of one of his thighs, due to a wound—obliged him to accept the post of major. He was slightly lame, but it would have been imprudent to tell him so, as he refused to own it.

‘What, you, major?’ said Madame Burle with growing astonishment.

‘Yes, thunder,’ grumbled Laguitte, ‘and I must be confoundedly fond of you to roam the streets on such a night as this. One would think twice before sending even a parson out.’

He shook himself, and little rivulets fell from his huge boots on to the floor. Then he looked round him.

‘ I particularly want to see Burle. Is the lazy beggar already in bed ? ’

‘ No, he is not in yet,’ said the old woman in her harsh voice.

The major looked furious ; and, raising his voice, he shouted : ‘ What, not at home ! But in that case they hoaxed me at the café, Mélanie’s establishment, you know. I went there, and a maid grinned at me, saying that the captain had gone home to bed. Curse the girl ! I suspected as much, and felt like pulling her ears ! ’

After this outburst he became somewhat calmer, stamping about the room in an undecided way ; withal seeming greatly disturbed. Madame Burle looked at him attentively.

‘ Is it the captain personally whom you want to see ? ’ she said at last.

‘ Yes,’ he answered.

‘ Can I not tell him what you have to say ? ’

‘ No.’

She did not insist, but remained standing without taking her eyes off the major, who did not seem able to make up his mind to leave. Finally, in a fresh burst of rage, he exclaimed with an oath : ‘ It can’t be helped. As I am here you may as well know—after all it is, perhaps, best.’

He sat down before the chimneypiece, stretching out his muddy boots as if a bright fire had been burning. Madame Burle was about to resume her own seat when she remarked that Charles, overcome by fatigue, had dropped his head between the open pages of his dictionary. The arrival of the major had at first interested him, but seeing that he remained unnoticed he had been unable to struggle against his sleepiness. His grandmother turned towards the table to slap his frail little hands, whitening in the lamplight, when Laguitte stopped her.

‘No—no!’ said he. ‘Let the poor little man sleep. I haven’t got anything funny to say. There’s no need for him to hear me.’

The old lady sat down in her arm-chair; deep silence reigned, and they looked at one another.

‘Well, yes,’ said the major at last, punctuating his words with an angry motion of his chin, ‘he has been and done it; that hound Burle has been and done it!’

Not a muscle of Madame Burle’s face moved, but she became livid, and her figure stiffened. Then the major continued: ‘I had my doubts. I had intended mentioning the subject to you. Burle was spending too much money, and he had an idiotic look which I did not fancy. Thunder and lightning! what a fool a man must be to behave so filthily!’

Then he thumped his knee furiously with his clenched fist, and seemed to choke with indignation. The old woman put the straightforward question:

‘He has stolen?’

‘You can’t have an idea of it. You see, I never examined his accounts; I approved and signed them. You know how those things are managed. However, just before the inspection—as the colonel is a crotchety old maniac—I said to Burle: “I say, old man, look to your accounts; I am answerable, you know,” and then I felt perfectly secure. Well, about a month ago, as he seemed queer, and some nasty stories were circulating, I peered a little closer into the books and pottered over the entries. I thought everything looked straight and very well kept——’

At this point he stopped, convulsed by such a fit of rage that he had to relieve himself by a volley of appalling oaths. Finally he resumed: ‘It isn’t the swindle that angers me, it is his disgusting behaviour to me. He has gammoned me, Madame Burle. By God! does he take me for an old fool?’

‘So he stole?’ the mother again questioned.

‘This evening,’ continued the major, more quietly, ‘I had just finished my dinner when Gagneux came in—you know Gagneux, the butcher at the corner of the Place aux Herbes? Another dirty beast who got the meat contract, and makes our men eat all the diseased cowflesh in the neighbourhood! Well, I received him like a dog, and then he let it all out—blurted out the whole thing, and a pretty mess it is! It appears that Burle only paid him in dribblets and had got himself into a muddle—a confusion of figures which the devil himself couldn’t disentangle. In short, Burle owes the butcher two thousand francs, and Gagneux threatens that he’ll inform the colonel if he is not paid. To make matters worse, Burle, just to blind me, handed me every week a forged receipt which he had squarely signed with Gagneux’ name. To think he did that to me, his old friend! Ah, curse him!’

With increasing profanity the major rose to his feet, shook his fist at the ceiling, and then fell back in his chair. Madame Burle again repeated: ‘He has stolen. It was inevitable.’

Then, without a word of judgment or condemnation, she added, simply: ‘Two thousand francs—we have not got them. There are barely thirty francs in the house.’

‘I expected as much,’ said Laguitte. ‘And do you know where all the money goes? Why, Mélanie gets it—yes, Mélanie; a creature who has turned Burle into a perfect fool. Ah, those women! those fiendish women! I always said they would do for him! I cannot conceive what he is made of! He is only five years younger than I am, and yet he is as mad as ever. What a woman-hunter he is!’

Another long silence followed. Outside the rain was increasing in violence, and throughout the sleepy little town one could hear the crashing of slates and chimney-

pots as they were dashed by the blast on to the pavements of the streets.

‘Come,’ suddenly said the major, rising up, ‘my stopping here won’t mend matters. I have warned you—and now I’m off.’

‘What is to be done? To whom can we apply?’ muttered the old woman drearily.

‘Don’t give way—we must consider. If I only had the two thousand francs—but you know that I am not rich.’

The major stopped short in confusion. This old bachelor, wifeless and childless, spent his pay in drink and gambled away at *écarté* whatever money his cognac and absinthe left in his pocket. Despite that, however, he was scrupulously honest from a sense of discipline.

‘Never mind,’ he added, as he reached the threshold, ‘I’ll begin by stirring him up. I shall move heaven and earth! What! Burle, Colonel Burle’s son, condemned for theft! That cannot be! I would sooner burn down the town! Now, thunder and lightning! don’t worry; it is far more annoying for me than for you.’

He shook the old lady’s hand roughly and vanished into the shadows of the staircase, while she held the lamp aloft to light the way. When she returned and replaced the lamp on the table she stood for a moment motionless in front of Charles, who was still asleep with his face lying on the dictionary. His pale cheeks and long fair hair made him look like a girl, and she gazed at him dreamily, a shade of tenderness passing over her harsh countenance. But it was only a passing emotion; her features regained their look of cold obstinate determination, and, giving the youngster a sharp rap on his little hand, she said:

‘Charles—your lessons.’

The boy awoke, dazed and shivering, and again rapidly turned over the leaves. At the same moment Major



Laguitte, slamming the house door behind him, received on his head a quantity of water falling from the gutters above, whereupon he began to swear in so loud a voice that he could be heard above the storm. And after that no sound broke upon the pelting downpour save the slight rustle of the boy's pen travelling over the paper. Madame Burle had resumed her seat near the chimney-piece, still rigid, with her eyes fixed on the dead embers, preserving, indeed, her habitual attitude, and absorbed in her one idea.

## II

THE Café de Paris, kept by Mélanie Cartier, a widow, was situated on the Place du Palais, a large irregular square planted with meagre, dusty elm trees. The place was so well known in Vauchamp that it was customary to say, 'Are you coming to Mélanie's?' At the further end of the first room, which was a spacious one, there was another called 'the divan,' a narrow apartment having sham leather benches placed against the walls, while at each corner there stood a marble-topped table. The widow, deserting her seat in the front room, where she left her little servant Phrosine, spent her evenings in the inner apartment, ministering to a few customers, the usual frequenters of the place, those who were currently styled 'the gentlemen of the divan.' When a man belonged to that set it was as if he had a label on his back; he was spoken of with smiles of mingled contempt and envy.

Madame Cartier had become a widow when she was five-and-twenty. Her husband, a wheelwright, who, on the death of an uncle, had amazed Vauchamp by taking the Café de Paris, had one fine day brought her back with him from Montpellier, where he was wont to repair twice a year to

purchase liqueurs. As he was stocking his establishment he selected, together with divers beverages, a woman of the sort he wanted—of an engaging aspect, and apt to stimulate the trade of the house. It was never known where he had picked her up, but he married her after trying her in the café during six months or so. Opinions were divided in Vauchamp as to her merits, some folks declaring that she was superb, while others asserted that she looked like a drum-major. She was a tall woman, with large features and coarse hair falling low over her forehead. However, everyone agreed that she knew very well how to fool the sterner sex. She had fine eyes, and was wont to fix them with a bold stare on the gentlemen of the divan, who coloured and became like wax in her hands. She also had the reputation of possessing a wonderfully fine figure, and Southerners appreciate a statuesque style of beauty.

Cartier had died in a singular way. Rumour hinted at a conjugal quarrel; a kick, producing some internal tumour. Whatever may have been the truth, Mélanie found herself encumbered with the café, which was far from doing a prosperous business. Her husband had wasted his uncle's inheritance in drinking his own absinthe, and wearing out the cloth of his own billiard-table. For a while it was believed that the widow would have to sell out, but she liked the life and the establishment just as it was. If she could secure a few customers the bigger room might remain deserted. So she limited herself to re-papering the divan in white and gold and re-covering the benches. She began by entertaining a chemist. Then a vermicelli maker, a lawyer, and a retired magistrate put in an appearance; and thus it was that the café remained open, although the waiter did not receive twenty orders a day. No objections were raised by the authorities, as appearances were kept up; and, indeed, it was not deemed

advisable to interfere, for some respectable folks might have been worried.

Of an evening, five or six well-to-do citizens would enter the front room and play at dominoes there. Although Cartier was dead, and the *Café de Paris* had got a queer name, they saw nothing, and kept up their old habits. In course of time, the waiter having nothing to do, Mélanie dismissed him, and made Phrosine light the solitary gas burner in the corner where the domino-players congregated. Occasionally a party of young men, attracted by the gossip that circulated through the town, would come in, wildly excited, and laughing loudly and awkwardly. But they were received there with icy dignity. As a rule they did not even see the widow, and even if she happened to be present, she treated them with withering disdain, so that they withdrew stammering and confused. Mélanie was too astute to indulge in any compromising whims. While the front room remained obscure, save in the corner where the few townsfolk rattled their dominoes, she personally waited on the gentlemen of the divan, showing herself amiable without being free, merely venturing in moments of familiarity to lean on the shoulder of one or another of them, the better to watch a skilfully played game of *écarté*.

One evening the gentlemen of the divan, who had ended by tolerating each other's presence, experienced a disagreeable surprise on finding Captain Burle at home there. He had casually entered the *café* that same morning to get a glass of vermouth, so it seemed, and he had found Mélanie there. They had conversed, and in the evening, when he returned, Phrosine immediately showed him to the inner room.

Two days later Burle reigned there supreme; still he had not frightened the chemist, the vermicelli-maker, the lawyer, or the retired magistrate away. The captain, who



was short and dumpy, worshipped tall plump women. In his regiment he had been nicknamed 'Petticoat Burle,' on account of his constant philandering. Whenever the officers, and even the privates, met some monstrous-looking creature, some giantess puffed out with fat, whether she were in velvet or in rags, they would invariably exclaim, 'There goes one to Petticoat Burle's taste!' Thus Mélanie, with her opulent presence, quite conquered him. He was lost—quite wrecked. In less than a fortnight he had fallen to vacuous imbecility. With much the expression of a whipped hound in the tiny sunken eyes which lighted up his bloated face, he was incessantly watching the widow in mute adoration before her masculine features and stubby hair. For fear that he might be dismissed, he put up with the presence of the other gentlemen of the divan, and spent his pay in the place down to the last copper. A sergeant reviewed the situation in one sentence—'Petticoat Burle is done for; he's a buried man!'

It was nearly ten o'clock when Major Laguitte furiously flung the door of the café open. For a moment those inside could see the deluged square transformed into a dark sea of liquid mud, bubbling under the terrible down-pour. The major, now soaked to the skin and leaving a stream behind him, strode up to the small counter where Phrosine was reading a novel.

'You little wretch,' he yelled, 'you have dared to gammon an officer; you deserve——'

And then he lifted his hand as if to deal a blow such as would have felled an ox. The little maid shrank back terrified, while the amazed domino-players looked on open-mouthed. However, the major did not linger there—he pushed the divan door open, and appeared before Mélanie and Burle just as the widow was playfully making the captain sip his grog in small spoonfuls, as if she were

feeding a pet canary. Only the ex-magistrate and the chemist had come that evening, and they had retired early in a melancholy frame of mind. Then Mélanie, being in want of three hundred francs for the morrow, had taken advantage of the opportunity to cajole the captain.

‘Come,’ said she, ‘open your mouth ; ain’t it nice you greedy piggy-wiggy ?’

Burle, flushing scarlet, with glazed eyes and sunken figure, was sucking the spoon with an air of intense enjoyment.

‘Good heavens !’ roared the major from the threshold, ‘you now play tricks on me, do you ? I’m sent to the round-about and told that you never came here, and yet all the while here you are, addling your silly brains ?’

Burle shuddered, pushing the grog away, while Mélanie stepped angrily in front of him as if to shield him with her portly figure ; but Laguitte looked at her with that quiet, resolute expression well known to women who are familiar with bodily chastisement.

‘Leave us,’ he said curtly.

She hesitated for the space of a second. She almost felt the gust of the expected blow ; and then, white with rage, she joined Phrosine in the outer room.

When the two men were alone, Major Laguitte walked up to Burle, looked at him, and, slightly stooping, yelled into his face these two words—‘You pig !’

The captain, quite dazed, endeavoured to retort ; but he had not time to do so.

‘Silence !’ resumed the major. ‘You have bamboozled a friend. You palmed off on me a lot of forged receipts which might have sent both of us to the gallows. Do you call that proper behaviour ? Is that the sort of trick to play a friend of thirty years’ standing ?’

Burle, who had fallen back in his chair, was livid ; his limbs shook as if with ague. Meanwhile the major,

striding up and down, and striking the tables wildly with his fists, continued : ' So you have become a thief like the veriest scribbling cur of a clerk, and all for the sake of that creature here ! If at least you had stolen for your mother's sake it would have been honourable ! But, curse it, to play tricks and bring the money into this shanty, is what I cannot understand ! Tell me—what are you made of at your age to go to the dogs as you are going all for the sake of a creature like a grenadier ! '

' *You gamble——* ' stammered the captain.

' Yes—I do—curse it ! ' thundered the major, lashed into still greater fury by this remark, ' and I am a pitiful rogue to do so, because it swallows up all my pay and doesn't redound to the honour of the French army. However, I don't steal. Kill yourself, if it pleases you, starve your mother and the boy, but respect the regimental cash-box, and don't drag your friends down with you.'

He stopped. Burle was sitting there with fixed eyes and a stupid air. Nothing was heard for a moment save the clatter of the major's heels.

' And not a single copper,' he continued aggressively. ' Can you picture yourself between two gendarmes, eh ? '

He then grew a little calmer, caught hold of Burle's wrists and forced him to rise up.

' Come ! ' he said gruffly. ' Something must be done at once, for I cannot go to bed with this affair on my mind—I have an idea.'

In the front room Mélanie and Phrosine were talking eagerly in low voices. When the widow saw the two men leaving the divan, she moved towards Burle, and said coaxingly : ' What, are you going already, captain ? '

' Yes, he's going,' brutally answered Laguitte, ' and I don't intend to let him set foot here again.'

The little maid felt frightened and pulled her mistress back by the skirt of her dress ; in doing so she imprudently

murmured the word 'drunkard,' and thereby brought down the slap which the major's hand had been itching to deal for some time past. Both women having stooped, however, the blow only fell on Phrosine's back hair, flattening her cap and breaking her comb. The domino-players were indignant.

'Let's cut it,' shouted Laguitte, and he pushed Burle on to the pavement. 'If I remained I should smash every one in the place.'

To cross the square they had to wade up to their ankles in mud. The rain, driven by the wind, poured off their faces. The captain walked on in silence, while the major kept on reproaching him with his cowardice and its disastrous consequences. Wasn't it sweet weather for tramping the streets? If he hadn't been such an idiot they would both be warmly tucked up in bed instead of paddling about in the mud. Then he spoke of Gagneux—a scoundrel whose diseased meat had on three separate occasions made the whole regiment ill. In a week, however, the contract would come to an end, and the fiend himself would not get it renewed.

'It rests with me,' the major grumbled. 'I can select whomsoever I choose, and I'd rather cut off my right arm than put that poisoner in the way of earning another copper.'

Just then he slipped into a gutter, and, half-choked by a string of oaths, he gasped:

'You understand—I am going to rout up Gagneux. You must stop outside while I go in. I must know what the rascal is up to, and if he'll dare to carry out his threat of informing the colonel to-morrow. A butcher—curse him! The idea of compromising oneself with a butcher! Ah, you aren't over proud, and I shall never forgive you for all this.'

They had now reached the Place aux Herbes.

Gagneux' house was quite dark, but Laguitte knocked so loudly that he was eventually admitted. Burle remained alone in the dense obscurity, and did not even attempt to seek any shelter. He stood at a corner of the market, under the pelting rain, his head filled with a loud buzzing noise which prevented him from thinking. He did not feel impatient, for he was unconscious of the flight of time. He stood there looking at the house, which, with its closed door and windows, seemed quite lifeless. When at the end of an hour the major came out again it appeared to the captain as if he had only just gone in.

Laguitte was so grimly mute that Burle did not venture to question him. For a moment they sought each other, groping about in the dark; then they resumed their walk through the sombre streets, where the water rolled as in the bed of a torrent. They moved on in silence side by side, the major being so abstracted that he even forgot to swear. However as they again crossed the Place du Palais, at the sight of the Café de Paris, which was still lighted up, he dropped his hand on Burle's shoulder and said, 'If ever you re-enter that hole, I——'

'No fear!' answered the captain, without letting his friend finish his sentence.

Then he stretched out his hand.

'No, no,' said Laguitte, 'I'll see you home; I'll at least make sure that you'll sleep in your bed to-night.'

They went on, and as they ascended the Rue des Recollets they slackened their pace. When the captain's door was reached and Burle had taken out his latch-key, he ventured to ask:—

'Well?'

'Well,' answered the major, gruffly, 'I am as dirty a rogue as you are. Yes! I have done a scurrilous thing. The fiend take you! Our soldiers will eat carrion for three months longer.'



Then he explained that Gagneux, the disgusting Gagneux, had a horribly level head, and that he had persuaded him—the major—to strike a bargain. He would refrain from informing the colonel, and he would even make a present of the two thousand francs and replace the forged receipts by genuine ones, on condition that the major bound himself to renew the meat contract. It was a settled thing.

‘Ah!’ continued Laguitte, ‘calculate what profits the brute must make out of the meat, to part with such a sum as two thousand francs.’

Burle, choking with emotion, grasped his old friend’s hands, stammering confused words of thanks. The vile-ness of the action committed for his sake brought tears into his eyes.

‘I never did such a thing before,’ growled Laguitte, ‘but I was driven to it—curse it, to think that I haven’t those two thousand francs in my drawer! It is enough to make one hate cards. It is my own fault. I am not worth much; only, mark my words—don’t begin again, for, curse it—I sha’n’t.’

The captain embraced him, and when he had entered the house, the major stood a moment before the closed door, to make certain that he had gone upstairs to bed. Then as midnight was striking, and the rain was still belabouring the dark town, he slowly turned homewards. The thought of his men almost broke his heart, and stopping short he said aloud in a voice full of compassion:

‘Poor devils! what a lot of cow beef they’ll have to swllaow for those two thousand francs!’

## III

THE regiment was altogether nonplussed: Petticoat Burle had quarrelled with Mélanie. When a week had elapsed it became a proved and undeniable fact; the captain no longer set foot inside the Café de Paris, where the chemist, it was averred, once more reigned in his stead, to the profound sorrow of the retired magistrate. An even more incredible statement was that Captain Burle led the life of a recluse in the Rue des Recollets. He was becoming a reformed character; he spent his evenings at his own fireside, hearing little Charles repeat his lessons. His mother, who had never breathed a word to him of his manipulations with Gagneux, maintained her old severity of demeanour as she sat opposite to him in her arm-chair, but her looks seemed to imply that she believed him re-claimed.

A fortnight later Major Laguitte came one evening to invite himself to dinner. He felt some awkwardness at the prospect of meeting Burle again, not on his own account, but because he dreaded awakening painful memories. However, as the captain was mending his ways he wished to shake hands and break a crust with him. He thought this would please his old friend.

When Laguitte arrived, Burle was in his room, so it was the old lady who received the major. The latter, after announcing that he had come to have a plate of soup with them, added, lowering his voice:

‘Well, how goes it?’

‘It is all right,’ answered the old lady.

‘Nothing queer?’

‘Absolutely nothing. Never away—in bed at nine—and looking quite happy.’

‘Ah! confound it,’ replied the major, ‘I knew very well

he only wanted a shaking. He has some heart left, the dog ! ’

When Burle appeared he almost crushed the major’s hands in his grasp ; and standing before the fire, waiting for the dinner, they conversed peacefully, honestly together, extolling the charms of home life. The captain vowed he wouldn’t exchange his home for a kingdom, and declared that when he had removed his braces, put on his slippers, and settled himself in his arm-chair, no king was fit to hold a candle to him. The major assented and examined him. At all events his virtuous conduct had not made him any thinner ; he still looked bloated, his eyes were bleared, and his mouth was heavy. He seemed to be half asleep as he repeated mechanically : ‘ Home life ! there’s nothing like home life, nothing in the world ! ’

‘ No doubt,’ said the major ; ‘ still, one mustn’t exaggerate—take a little exercise and come to the café now and then.’

‘ To the café, why ? ’ asked Burle. ‘ Do I lack anything here ? No, no, I remain at home.’

When Charles had laid his books aside, Laguitte was surprised to see a maid come in to lay the cloth.

‘ So, you keep a servant now,’ he remarked to Madame Burle.

‘ I had to get one,’ she answered with a sigh. ‘ My legs are not what they used to be, and the household was going to rack and ruin. Fortunately Cabrol let me have his daughter. You know old Cabrol, who sweeps the market ? He did not know what to do with Rose—I am teaching her how to work.’

Just then the girl left the room.

‘ How old is she ? ’ asked the major.

‘ Barely seventeen. She is stupid and dirty, but I only give her ten francs a month, and she eats nothing but soup.’



When Rose returned with an armful of plates, Laguitte, though he did not care about women, began to scrutinise her and was amazed at seeing so ugly a creature. She was very short, very dark, and slightly deformed, with a face like an ape's: a flat nose, a huge mouth, and narrow greenish eyes. Her broad back and long arms gave her an appearance of great strength.

'What a snout!' said Laguitte laughing, when the maid had again left the room to fetch the cruets.

'Never mind,' said Burle carelessly, 'she is very obliging and does all one asks her. She suits us well enough as a scullion.'

The dinner was very pleasant. It consisted of boiled beef and mutton hash. Charles was encouraged to relate some stories of his school, and Madame Burle repeatedly asked him the same question: 'Don't you want to be a soldier?' A faint smile hovered over the child's wan lips as he answered with the frightened obedience of a trained dog, 'Oh yes, grandmother.' Captain Burle, with his elbows on the table, was masticating slowly with an absent-minded expression. The big room was getting warmer, the single lamp placed on the table left the corners in vague gloom. There was a certain amount of heavy comfort, the familiar intimacy of penurious people who do not change their plates at every course, but become joyously excited at the unexpected appearance of a bowl of whipped egg cream, at the close of the meal.

Rose, whose heavy tread shook the floor as she paced round the table, had not yet opened her mouth. At last she stopped behind the captain's chair, and asked in a gruff voice: 'Cheese, sir?'

Burle started. 'What, eh? Oh yes—cheese. Hold the plate tight.'

He cut a piece of Gruyère, the girl watching him the while with her narrow eyes. Laguitte laughed; Rose's

unparalleled ugliness amused him immensely. He whispered in the captain's ear, 'She is ripping! there never was such a nose and such a mouth! You ought to send her to the colonel's some day as a curiosity. It would amuse him to see her.'

More and more struck by this phenomenal ugliness, the major felt a paternal desire to examine the girl more closely.

'Come here,' said he, 'I want some cheese too.'

She brought the plate, and Laguitte, sticking the knife in the Gruyère, stared at her, grinning the while because he discovered that she had one nostril broader than the other. Rose gravely allowed herself to be looked at, waiting till the gentleman had done laughing.

She removed the cloth and disappeared. Burle immediately went to sleep in the chimney-corner, while the major and Madame Burle began to chat. Charles had returned to his exercises. Quietude fell from the lofty ceiling, the quietude of a middle-class household gathered in concord around their fireside. At nine o'clock Burle woke up, yawned, and announced that he was going off to bed; he apologised, but declared that he could not keep his eyes open. Half an hour later, when the major took his leave, Madame Burle vainly called for Rose to light him downstairs; the girl must have gone up to her room; she was, indeed, a regular hen, snoring the round of the clock without waking.

'No need to disturb anybody,' said Laguitte on the landing; 'my legs are not much better than yours, but if I get hold of the banisters I sha'n't break any bones. Now, my dear lady, I leave you happy; your troubles are ended at last. I watched Burle closely, and I'll take my oath that he's guileless as a child. Dash it—after all it was high time for Petticoat Burle to reform; he was going downhill fast.'

The major went away fully satisfied with the house and its inmates ; the walls were of glass, and could harbour no equivocal conduct. What particularly delighted him in his friend's return to virtue was that it absolved him from the obligation of verifying the accounts. Nothing was more distasteful to him than the inspection of a number of ledgers, and as long as Burle kept steady, he—Laguitte—could smoke his pipe in peace and sign the books in all confidence. However, he continued to keep one eye open for a little while longer, and found the receipts genuine, the entries correct, the columns admirably balanced. A month later he contented himself with glancing at the receipts and running his eye over the totals. Then one morning, without the slightest suspicion of there being anything wrong, simply because he had lit a second pipe and had nothing to do, he carelessly added up a row of figures and fancied that he detected an error of thirteen francs. The balance seemed perfectly correct, and yet he was not mistaken ; the total outlay was thirteen francs more than the various sums for which receipts were furnished. It looked queer, but he said nothing to Burle, just making up his mind to examine the next accounts closely. On the following week he detected a fresh error of nineteen francs, and then, suddenly becoming alarmed, he shut himself up with the books and spent a wretched morning poring over them, perspiring, swearing, and feeling as if his very skull were bursting with the figures. At every page he discovered thefts of a few francs—the most miserable petty thefts—ten, eight, eleven francs, latterly, three and four ; and, indeed, there was one column showing that Burle had pilfered just one franc and a half. For two months, however, he had been steadily robbing the cash-box ; and, by comparing dates, the Major found to his disgust that the famous lesson respecting Gagneux had only kept him straight for one week ! This last discovery

infuriated Laguitte, who struck the books with his clenched fists, yelling through a shower of oaths :

‘ This is more abominable still ! At least there was some pluck about those forged receipts of Gagneux. But this time he is as contemptible as a cook charging two-pence extra for her cabbages. Powers of hell ! to pilfer a franc and a half and clap it in his pocket ! Hasn’t the brute got any pride, then ? Couldn’t he run away with the safe, or play the fool with actresses ? ’

The pitiful meanness of these pilferings revolted the major, and, moreover, he was enraged at having been duped a second time, deceived by the simple stupid dodge of falsified additions. He rose up at last and paced his office for a whole hour growling aloud.

‘ This gives me his measure. Even if I were to thrash him to a jelly every morning, he would still drop a couple of coins into his pocket every afternoon. But where can he spend it all ? He is never seen abroad, he goes to bed at nine, and everything looks so clean and proper over there. Can the brute have vices that nobody knows of ? ’

He returned to the desk, added up the subtracted money and found a total of five hundred and forty-five francs. Where was this deficiency to come from ? The inspection was close at hand, and if the crotchety colonel should take it into his head to examine a single page, the murder would be out, and Burle would be done for.

This idea froze the major, who left off cursing, picturing Madame Burle erect and despairing, and at the same time he felt his heart swell with personal grief and shame.

‘ Well,’ he muttered, ‘ I must first of all look into the rogue’s business ; I will act afterwards.’

As he walked over to Burle’s office he caught sight of a skirt vanishing through the doorway. Fancying that he held a clue to the mystery, he slipped up quietly and listened, and speedily recognised Mélanie’s shrill voice.



She was complaining of the gentlemen of the divan. She had signed a promissory-note which she was unable to meet; the bailiffs were in the house, and all her goods would be sold. The captain, however, barely replied to her. He alleged that he had no money, whereupon she burst into tears and began to coax him. But her blandishments were apparently ineffectual, for Burle's husky voice could be heard repeating 'Impossible! impossible!' and finally the widow withdrew in a towering passion. The major, amazed at the turn affairs were taking, waited a few moments longer before entering the office, where Burle had remained alone. He found him very calm, and despite his furious inclination to call him names he also remained calm, determined to begin by finding out the exact truth.

The office certainly did not look like a swindler's den. A cane-seated chair, covered with an honest leather cushion, stood before the captain's desk, and in a corner there was the locked safe. Summer was coming on, and the song of a canary sounded through the open window. The apartment was very neat and tidy, redolent of old papers, and altogether its appearance inspired one with confidence.

'Wasn't it Mélanie who was leaving here as I came along?' asked Laguitte.

Burle shrugged his shoulders.

'Yes,' he mumbled. 'She has been dunning me for two hundred francs, but she can't screw ten out of me—not even ten pence.'

'Indeed!' said the major, just to try him. 'I heard that you had made it up with her.'

'I? Certainly not. I have done with the likes of her for good.'

Laguitte went away, feeling greatly perplexed. Where had the five hundred and forty-five francs gone? Had the idiot taken to drinking or gambling? He decided to pay

Burle a surprise visit that very evening at his own house, and, may be, by questioning his mother, he might learn something. However, during the afternoon his leg became very painful; latterly he had been feeling in ill-health, and he had to use a stick so as not to limp too outrageously. This stick grieved him sorely, and he declared with angry despair that he was now no better than a pensioner. However, towards the evening, making a strong effort, he pulled himself out of his arm-chair, and, leaning heavily on his stick, dragged himself through the darkness to the Rue des Recollets, which he reached about nine o'clock. The street door was still unlocked, and on going up he stood panting on the third landing, when he heard voices on the upper floor. One of these voices was Burle's, so he fancied; and out of curiosity he ascended another flight of stairs. Then, at the end of a passage on the left, he saw a ray of light coming from a door, which stood ajar. As the creaking of his boots resounded, this door was sharply closed, and he found himself in the dark.

'Some cook going to bed!' he muttered angrily. 'I'm a fool.'

All the same, he groped his way as gently as possible to the door and listened. Two people were talking in the room, and he stood aghast; for it was Burle and that fright Rose! Then he listened, and the conversation he heard left him no doubt of the awful truth. For a moment he lifted his stick as if to beat down the door. Then he shuddered, and, staggering back, leant against the wall. His legs were trembling under him, while in the darkness of the staircase he brandished his stick as if it had been a sabre.

What was to be done? After his first moment of passion there had come thoughts of the poor old lady below. And these made him hesitate. It was all over with the captain now; when a man sank as low as that he was hardly worth the few shovelfuls of earth that are thrown over carrion to prevent them from polluting the



atmosphere. Whatever might be said to Burle, however much one might try to shame him, he would assuredly begin again the next day. Ah, heavens, to think of it! the money! the honour of the army! the name of Burle, that respected name, dragged through the mire! By all that was holy, this could and should not be!

Presently the major softened. If he had only possessed five hundred and forty-five francs! But he had not got such an amount. On the previous day he had drunk too much cognac, just like a mere sub., and had lost shockingly at cards. It served him right—he ought to have known better! And if he was so lame, he richly deserved it too; by rights, in fact, his leg ought to be much worse.

At last he crept downstairs and rang at the bell of Madame Burle's flat. Five minutes elapsed and then the old lady appeared.

'I beg your pardon for keeping you waiting,' she said; 'I thought that dormouse Rose was still about. I must go and shake her.'

But the major detained her.

'Where is Burle?' he asked.

'Oh, he has been snoring since nine o'clock. Would you like to knock at his door?'

'No, no, I only wanted to have a chat with you.'

In the parlour Charles sat at his usual place, having just finished his exercises. He looked terrified, and his poor little white hands were quite tremulous. In point of fact, his grandmother, before sending him to bed, was wont to read some martial stories aloud so as to develop the latent family heroism in his bosom. That night she had selected the episode of the *Vengeur*,<sup>1</sup> the man-of-war freighted with dying heroes and sinking into the sea. The child, while listening, had become almost hysterical, and his head was racked as with some ghastly nightmare.

<sup>1</sup> The celebrated legend of the First Republic, disproved in so masterly a fashion by Carlyle.—ED.

Madame Burle asked the major to let her finish the perusal, and he assented. When the last sailor had shouted, 'Long live the Republic!' she solemnly closed the volume. Charles was as white as a sheet.

'You see,' said the old lady, 'the duty of every French soldier is to die for his country.'

'Yes, grandmother.'

Then the lad kissed her on the forehead, and, shivering with fear, went to bed in his big room, where the faintest creak of the panelling threw him into a cold sweat.

The major had listened with a grave face. Yes, by heavens! honour was honour, and he would never permit that wretched Burle to disgrace the old woman and the boy! As the lad was so devoted to the military profession, it was necessary that he should be able to enter St. Cyr with his head erect.

When Madame Burle took up the lamp to show the major out, she passed the door of the captain's room, and stopped short, surprised to see the key outside, which was a most unusual occurrence.

'Do go in,' she said to Laguitte, 'it is bad for him to sleep so much.'

And before he could interpose, she had opened the door, and stood transfixed on finding the room empty. Laguitte turned crimson and looked so foolish that she suddenly understood everything, enlightened by the sudden recollection of several little incidents to which she had previously attached no importance.

'You knew it—you knew it!' she stammered. 'Why was I not told? Oh, my God, to think of it! Ah! he has been stealing again—I feel it!'

She remained erect, white and rigid. Then she added in a harsh voice:

'Look you—I wish he were dead!'

Laguitte caught hold of both her hands, which for a

moment he kept tightly clasped in his own. Then he left her hurriedly, for he felt a lump rising in his throat, and tears coming to his eyes. Ah, by all the powers ! this time his mind was quite made up.

## IV

THE regimental inspection was to take place at the end of the month. The major had ten days before him. On the very next morning, however, he crawled, limping, as far as the Café de Paris, where he ordered some beer. Mélanie grew pale when she saw him enter, and it was with a lively recollection of a certain slap that Phrosine hastened to serve him. The major seemed very calm, however ; he called for a second chair to rest his bad leg upon, and drank his beer quietly like any other thirsty man. He had sat there for about an hour when he saw two officers crossing the Place du Palais—Morandot, who commanded one of the battalions of the regiment, and Captain Doucet. Thereupon he excitedly waved his cane and shouted : ‘ Come in and have a glass of beer with me ! ’

The officers dared not refuse, but when the maid had brought the beer Morandot said to the major : ‘ So you patronise this place now ? ’

‘ Yes—the beer is good.’

Captain Doucet winked, and asked archly : ‘ Do you belong to the divan, major ? ’

Laguitte chuckled, but did not answer. Then the others began to chaff him about Mélanie, and he took their remarks good-naturedly, simply shrugging his shoulders. The widow was undoubtedly a fine woman, however much people might talk. Some of those who disparaged her would, in reality, be only too pleased to win her good graces. Then turning to the little counter and assuming an engaging air, he shouted :

‘ Three more glasses, madame.’

Mélanie was so taken aback that she rose and brought the beer herself. The major detained her at the table, and forgot himself so far as to softly pat the hand which she had carelessly placed on the back of a chair. Used as she was to alternate brutality and flattery, she immediately became confident, believing in a sudden whim of gallantry on the part of the 'old wreck' as she was wont to style the major when talking with Phrosine. Doucet and Morandot looked at each other in surprise. Was the major actually stepping into Petticoat Burle's shoes? The regiment would be convulsed if that were the case.

Suddenly, however, Laguitte, who kept his eye on the square, gave a start.

'Hallo, there's Burle!' he exclaimed.

'Yes, it is his time,' explained Phrosine. 'The captain passes every afternoon on his way from the office.'

In spite of his lameness the major had risen to his feet, pushing aside the chairs as he called out: 'Burle! I say—come along—and have a glass.'

The captain, quite aghast, and unable to understand why Laguitte was at the widow's, advanced mechanically. He was so perplexed that he again hesitated at the door.

'Another glass of beer,' ordered the major; and then turning to Burle, he added, 'What's the matter with you? Come in. Are you afraid of being eaten alive?'

The captain took a seat, and an awkward pause followed. Mélanie, who brought the beer with trembling hands, dreaded some scene which might result in the closing of her establishment. The major's gallantry made her uneasy, and she endeavoured to slip away, but he invited her to drink with them, and before she could refuse he had ordered Phrosine to bring a liqueur glass of anisette, doing so with as much coolness as if he had been master of the house. Mélanie was thus compelled to sit down between the captain and Laguitte, who exclaimed aggressively: 'I

*will* have ladies respected. We are French officers ! Let us drink madame's health !'

Burle, with his eyes fixed on his glass, smiled in an embarrassed way. The two other officers, shocked at the proceedings, had already tried to get off. Fortunately the café was deserted, save that the domino-players were having their afternoon game. At every fresh oath which came from the major they glanced around, scandalised by such an unusual accession of customers, and ready to threaten Mélanie that they would leave her for the Café de la Gare if the soldiery was going to invade her place, like the flies that buzzed about, attracted by the stickiness of the tables which Phrosine only scoured on Saturdays. She was now reclining behind the counter already reading a novel again.

'How's this—you are not drinking with madame ?' roughly said the major to Burle. 'Be civil at least.'

Then, as Doucet and Morandot were again preparing to leave, he stopped them.

'Why can't you wait ? We'll go together. It is only this brute who never knows how to behave himself.'

The two officers looked surprised at the major's sudden bad temper. Mélanie attempted to restore peace, and with a light laugh placed her hands on the arms of both men. However, Laguitte disengaged himself.

'No,' he roared, 'leave me alone. Why does he refuse to chink glasses with you ? I shall not allow you to be insulted—do you hear ? I am quite sick of him.'

Burle, paling under the insult, turned slightly and said to Morandot, 'What does this mean ? He calls me in here to insult me. Is he drunk ?'

With a wild oath the major rose on his trembling legs and struck the captain's cheek with his open hand. Mélanie dived and thus escaped one half of the smack. An appalling uproar ensued. Phrosine screamed behind the counter as if she herself had received the blow ; the



domino-players also entrenched themselves behind their table in fear lest the soldiers should draw their swords and massacre them. However, Doucet and Morandot pinioned the captain to prevent him from springing at the major's throat, and forcibly led him to the door. When they got him outside they succeeded in quieting him a little by repeating that Laguitte was quite in the wrong. They would lay the affair before the colonel, having witnessed it, and the colonel would give his decision. As soon as they had got Burle away they returned to the café, where they found Laguitte in reality greatly disturbed, with tears in his eyes, but affecting stolid indifference and slowly finishing his beer.

'Listen, major,' began Morandot; 'that was very wrong on your part. The captain is your inferior in rank, and you know that he won't be allowed to fight you.'

'That remains to be seen,' answered the major.

'But how has he offended you? He never uttered a word. Two old comrades too; it is absurd.'

The major made a vague gesture. 'No matter. He annoyed me.'

He could never be made to say anything else. Nothing more as to his motive was ever known. All the same, the scandal was a terrible one. The regiment was inclined to believe that Mélanie, incensed by the captain's defection, had contrived to entrap the major, telling him some abominable stories, and prevailing upon him to insult and strike Burle publicly. Who would have thought it of that old fogey Laguitte, who professed to be a woman-hater? they said. So he too had been caught at last. Despite the general indignation against Mélanie, this adventure made her very conspicuous; and her establishment soon drove a flourishing business.

On the following day the colonel summoned the major and the captain into his presence. He censured them



sternly, accusing them of disgracing their uniform by frequenting unseemly haunts. What resolution had they come to, he asked, as he could not authorise them to fight? This same question had occupied the whole regiment for the last twenty-four hours. Apologies were unacceptable on account of the blow, but as Laguitte was almost unable to stand, it was hoped that, should the colonel insist upon it, some reconciliation might be patched up.

'Come,' said the colonel, 'will you accept me as arbitrator?'

'I beg your pardon, colonel,' interrupted the major, 'I have brought you my resignation. Here it is. That settles everything. Please name the day for the duel.'

Burle looked at Laguitte in amazement, and the colonel thought it his duty to protest.

'This is a most serious step, major,' he began. 'Two years more and you would be entitled to your full pension.'

But again did Laguitte cut him short, saying gruffly, 'That is my own affair.'

'Oh, certainly! Well, I will send in your resignation, and as soon as it is accepted I will fix a day for the duel.'

The unexpected turn that events had taken startled the regiment. What possessed that lunatic major to persist in cutting the throat of his old comrade Burle? The officers again discussed Mélanie: they even began to dream of her. There must surely be something wonderful about her since she had completely fascinated two such tough old veterans, and brought them to a deadly feud. Morandot having met Laguitte, did not disguise his concern. If he—the major—was not killed, what would he live upon? He had no fortune, and the pension to which his cross of the Legion of Honour entitled him, with the half of a full

regimental pension which he would obtain on resigning, would barely find him in bread. While Morandot was thus speaking, Laguitte simply stared before him with his round eyes, persevering in the dumb obstinacy born of his narrow mind; and when his companion tried to question him respecting his hatred for Burle, he simply made the same vague gesture as before, and once again repeated:

‘He annoyed me; so much the worse.’

Every morning at mess, and at the canteen, the first words were: ‘Has the acceptance of the major’s resignation arrived?’ The duel was impatiently expected, and ardently discussed. The majority believed that Laguitte would be run through the body in three seconds, for it was madness for a man to fight with a paralysed leg which did not even allow him to stand upright. A few, however, shook their heads. Laguitte had never been a marvel of intellect, that was true; for the last twenty years, indeed, he had been held up as an example of stupidity, but there had been a time when he was known as the best fencer of the regiment; and although he had begun as a drummer, he had won his epaulets as the commander of a battalion by the sanguine bravery of a man who is quite unconscious of danger. On the other hand, Burle fenced but indifferently, and passed for a poltroon. However, they would soon know what to think.

Meanwhile the excitement became more and more intense as the acceptance of Laguitte’s resignation was so long in coming. The major was unmistakably the most anxious and upset of everybody. A week had passed by, and the general inspection would commence two days later. Nothing, however, had come as yet. He shuddered at the thought that he had, perhaps, struck his old friend and sent in his resignation all in vain, without delaying the exposure for a single minute. He had in reality reasoned

thus: If he himself were killed, he would not have the worry of witnessing the scandal; and if he killed Burle, as he expected to do, the affair would undoubtedly be hushed up. Thus he would save the Honour of the Army, and the little chap would be able to get in at St. Cyr. Ah! why wouldn't those wretched scribblers at the War Office hurry up a bit? The major could not keep still but was for ever wandering about before the post office stopping the estafettes and questioning the colonel's orderly to find out if the acceptance had arrived. He lost his sleep, and, careless as to people's remarks, he leant more and more heavily on his stick, hobbling about with no attempt to steady his gait.

On the day before that fixed for the inspection he was as usual on his way to the colonel's quarters, when he paused startled, to see Madame Burle (who was taking Charles to school) a few paces ahead of him. He had not met her since the scene at the Café de Paris, for she had remained in seclusion at home. Unmanned at thus meeting her, he stepped down to leave the whole side-walk free. Neither he nor the old lady bowed, and the little boy lifted his large inquisitive eyes in mute surprise. Madame Burle, cold and erect, brushed past the major without the least sign of emotion or recognition. When she had passed he looked after her with an expression of stupefied compassion.

'Confound it, I am no longer a man,' he growled, dashing away a tear.

When he arrived at the colonel's quarters, a captain in attendance greeted him with the words: 'It's all right at last. The papers have come.'

'Ah!' murmured Laguitte, growing very pale.

And again he beheld the old lady walking on, relentlessly rigid, and holding the little boy's hand. What! he had longed so eagerly for those papers for eight days past, and

now, when the scraps had come, he felt his brain on fire and his heart lacerated.

The duel took place on the morrow, in the barrack-yard behind a low wall. The air was keen, the sun shining brightly. Laguitte had almost to be carried to the ground; one of his seconds supported him on one side, while on the other he leant heavily on his stick. Burle looked half asleep, his face was puffy with unhealthy fat, as if he had spent a night of debauchery. Not a word was spoken. They were all anxious to have it over.

Captain Doucet crossed the swords of the two adversaries and then drew back, saying: 'Set-to, gentlemen.'

Burle was the first to attack; he wanted to test Laguitte's strength and ascertain what he had to expect. For the last ten days, the encounter had seemed to him a ghastly nightmare which he could not fathom. At times a hideous suspicion assailed him, but he put it aside with terror, for it meant death, and he refused to believe that a friend could play him such a trick, even to set things right. Besides, Laguitte's leg reassured him; he would prick the major on the shoulder, and then all would be over.

During well-nigh a couple of minutes the swords clashed, and then the captain lunged, but the major, recovering his old suppleness of wrist, parried in a masterly style, and if he had returned the attack Burle would have been pierced through. The captain now fell back; he was livid, for he felt that he was at the mercy of the man who had just spared him. At last he understood that this was an execution.

Laguitte, squarely poised on his infirm legs and seemingly turned to stone, stood waiting. The two men looked at each other fixedly. In Burle's blurred eyes there arose a supplication—a prayer for pardon. He knew why he was going to die, and like a child he promised not to transgress again. But the major's eyes remained im-



placable ; honour had spoken, and he silenced his emotion and his pity.

‘ Let it end,’ he muttered between his teeth.

Then it was he who attacked. Like a flash of lightning his sword flamed, flying from right to left, and then with a resistless thrust it pierced the breast of the captain, who fell like a log without even a groan.

Laguitte had released his hold upon his sword and stood gazing at that poor old rascal Burle, who was stretched upon his back with his fat stomach bulging out.

‘ Oh, my God ! my God ! ’ repeated the major furiously and despairingly, and then he began to swear.

They led him away, and, both his legs failing him, he had to be supported on either side, for he could not even use his stick.

Two months later the ex-major was crawling slowly along in the sunlight down a lonely street of Vauchamp, when he again found himself face to face with Madame Burle and little Charles. They were both in deep mourning. He tried to avoid them ; but he now only walked with difficulty, and they advanced straight upon him without hurrying or slackening their steps. Charles still had the same gentle, girlish, frightened face, and Madame Burle retained her stern, rigid demeanour, looking even harsher than ever.

As Laguitte shrank into the corner of a doorway, to leave the whole street to them, she abruptly stopped in front of him and stretched out her hand. He hesitated and then took it and pressed it, but he trembled so violently that he made the old lady’s arm shake. They exchanged glances in silence.

‘ Charles,’ said the boy’s grandmother at last, ‘ shake hands with the major.’

The boy obeyed without understanding. The major, who was very pale, barely ventured to touch the child’s

frail fingers ; then, feeling that he ought to speak, he stammered out : ' You still intend to send him to St. Cyr ? '

' Of course, when he is old enough,' answered Madame Burle.

But during the following week Charles was carried off by typhoid fever. One evening his grandmother had again read him the story of the *Vengeur*, to make him bold, and in the night he had become delirious. The poor little fellow died of fright.



# THE DEATH OF OLIVIER BECAILLE

## I

It was on a Saturday, at six in the morning, that I died, after a three days' illness. My wife was searching a trunk for some linen, and when she rose and turned she saw me rigid, with open eyes and silent pulses. She ran to me, fancying I had fainted, touched my hands, and bent over me. Then she suddenly grew alarmed, burst into tears, and stammered :

‘ My God ! my God ! he is dead ! ’

I heard everything, but the sounds seem to come from a great distance. My left eye still detected a faint glimmer, a whitish light in which all objects melted, but my right eye was quite bereft of sight. It was the coma of my whole being, as if a thunderbolt had struck me. My will was annihilated, not a fibre of my flesh obeyed my bidding. And yet amid the impotency of my inert limbs my thoughts subsisted, sluggish and lazy, still perfectly clear.

My poor Marguerite was crying ; she had dropped on her knees beside the bed, repeating in heartrending tones :

‘ He is dead ! my God ! he is dead ! ’

Was this strange state of torpor, this immobility of the

flesh, really death, although the functions of the intellect were not arrested? Was my soul only lingering for a brief space before it soared away for ever? From my childhood upwards I had been subject to hysterical attacks, and twice, in early youth, I had nearly succumbed to nervous fevers. By degrees all those who surrounded me had got accustomed to consider me an invalid, and to see me sickly. So much so, that I myself had forbidden my wife to call in a doctor when I had taken to my bed on the day of our arrival at the cheap lodging-house of the Rue Dauphine in Paris. A little rest would soon set me right again; it was only the fatigue of the journey which had caused my intolerable weariness. And yet I was conscious of having felt singularly uneasy. We had left our province somewhat abruptly; we were very poor, and had barely enough money to support ourselves till I drew my first month's salary in the office where I had obtained a situation. And now a sudden seizure was carrying me off!

Was it really death? I had pictured to myself a darker night, a deeper silence. As a little child I had already felt afraid to die. Being weak and compassionately petted by everyone, I had concluded that I had not long to live, that I should soon be buried; and the thought of the cold earth filled me with a dread I could not master—a dread which haunted me day and night. As I grew older the same terror pursued me. Sometimes, after long hours spent in reasoning with myself, I thought that I had conquered my fear. I reflected, 'After all, what does it matter? one dies and all is over. It is the common fate; nothing could be better or easier.'

I then prided myself on being able to look death boldly in the face; but suddenly a shiver froze my blood, and my dizzy anguish returned as if a giant hand had swung me over a dark abyss. It was some vision of the earth returning and setting reason at naught. How often at

night did I start up in bed, not knowing what cold breath had swept over my slumbers, but clasping my despairing hands and moaning, 'Must I die?' In those moments an icy horror would stop my pulses, while an appalling vision of dissolution rose before me. It was with difficulty that I could get to sleep again. Indeed, sleep alarmed me, it so closely resembled death. If I closed my eyes they might never open again—I might slumber on for ever.

I cannot tell if others have endured the same torture; I only know that my own life was made a torment by it. Death ever rose between me and all I loved; I can remember how the thought of it poisoned the happiest moments I spent with Marguerite. During the first months of our married life, when she lay sleeping by my side and I dreamed of a fair future for her and with her, the foreboding of some fatal separation dashed my hopes aside and embittered my delights. Perhaps we should be parted on the morrow—nay, perhaps in an hour's time. Then utter discouragement assailed me; I wondered what the bliss of being united availed me if it were to end in so cruel a disruption.

My morbid imagination revelled in scenes of mourning. I speculated as to who would be the first to depart, Marguerite or I. Either alternative caused me harrowing grief, and tears rose to my eyes at the thought of our shattered lives. At the happiest periods of my existence I often became a prey to grim dejection such as nobody could understand, but which was caused by the thought of impending nihility. When I was most successful I was to general wonder most depressed. The fatal question, 'What avails it?' rang like a knell in my ears. But the sharpest sting of this torment was that it came with a secret sense of shame, which rendered me unable to confide my thoughts to another. Husband and wife lying side by side in the darkened room may quiver with the same

shudder and yet remain mute ; for people do not mention death any more than they pronounce certain obscene words. Fear makes it nameless.

I was musing thus while my dear Marguerite knelt sobbing at my feet. It grieved me sorely to be unable to comfort her by telling her that I suffered no pain. If death were merely the annihilation of the flesh it had been foolish of me to harbour so much dread. I experienced a selfish kind of restfulness in which all my cares were forgotten. My memory had become extraordinarily vivid. My whole life passed before me rapidly like a play in which I no longer acted a part ; it was a curious and enjoyable sensation—I seemed to hear a far-off voice relating my own history.

I saw in particular a certain spot in the country near Guérande, on the way to Piriac. The road turns sharply, and some scattered pine-trees carelessly dot a rocky slope. When I was seven years old I used to pass through those pines with my father as far as a crumbling old house, where Marguerite's parents gave me pancakes. They were salt-gatherers, and earned a scanty livelihood by working the adjacent salt marshes. Then I remembered the school at Nantes, where I had grown up, leading a monotonous life within its ancient walls and yearning for the broad horizon of Guérande, and the salt marshes stretching to the limitless sea widening under the sky.

Next came a blank—my father was dead. I entered the hospital as clerk to the managing board and led a dreary life with one solitary diversion : my Sunday visits to the old house on the Piriac road. The salt works were doing badly ; poverty reigned in the land, and Marguerite's parents were nearly penniless. Marguerite, when merely a child, had been fond of me because I trundled her about in a wheelbarrow, but on the morning when I asked her in marriage she shrank from me with a frightened gesture,



and I realised that she thought me hideous. Her parents, however, consented at once; they looked upon my offer as a godsend, and the daughter submissively acquiesced. When she became accustomed to the idea of marrying me she did not seem to dislike it so much. On our wedding day at Guérande the rain fell in torrents, and when we got home my bride had to take off her dress, which was soaked through, and sit in her petticoats.

That was all the youth I ever had. We did not remain long in our province. One day I found my wife in tears. She was miserable, life was so dull, she wanted to get away. Six months later I had saved a little money by taking in extra work after office hours, and through the influence of a friend of my father's I obtained a petty appointment in Paris. I started off to settle there with the dear little woman so that she might cry no more. During the night which we spent in the third-class railway carriage, the seats being very hard, I took her in my arms in order that she might sleep.

That was the past, and now I had just died on the narrow bed of a Paris lodging-house, and my wife was crouching on the floor, and crying bitterly. The white light before my left eye was growing dim, but I remembered the room perfectly. On the left there was a chest of drawers, on the right a mantelpiece surmounted by a damaged clock without a pendulum, the hands of which marked ten minutes past ten. The window overlooked the Rue Dauphine, a long dark street. All Paris seemed to pass below, and the noise was so great that the window shook.

We knew nobody in the city; we had hurried our departure, but I was not expected at the office till the following Monday. Since I had taken to my bed I had wondered at my imprisonment in this narrow room into which we had tumbled after a railway journey of fifteen hours, followed by a hurried, confusing transit through



the noisy streets. My wife had nursed me with smiling tenderness, but I knew that she was anxious. She would walk to the window, glance out and return to the bedside, looking very pale and startled by the sight of the busy thoroughfare, the aspect of the vast city of which she did not know a single stone, and which deafened her with its continuous roar. What would happen to her if I never woke up again—alone, friendless, and unknowing as she was?

Marguerite had caught hold of one of my hands which lay passive on the coverlet, and covering it with kisses she repeated wildly: ‘Olivier, answer me. Oh, my God, he is dead, dead!’

So death was not complete annihilation. I could hear and think. I had been uselessly alarmed all those years. I had not dropped into utter vacancy as I had anticipated. I could not picture the disappearance of my being, the suppression of all that I had been, without the possibility of renewed existence. I had been wont to shudder whenever in any book or newspaper I came across a date of a hundred years hence. A date at which I should no longer be alive, a future which I should never see, filled me with unspeakable uneasiness. Was I not the whole world, and would not the universe crumble away when I was no more?

To dream of life in death had been a cherished vision, but this could not possibly be death. I should assuredly awake presently. Yes, in a few moments I would lean over, take Marguerite in my arms, and dry her tears. I would rest a little while longer before going to my office; and then a new life would begin, brighter than the last. However, I did not feel impatient; the commotion had been too strong. It was wrong of Marguerite to give way like that when I had not even the strength to turn my head on the pillow and smile at her. The next time that

she moaned out 'He is dead! dead!' I would embrace her, and murmur softly so as not to startle her: 'No, my darling, I was only asleep. You see I am alive, and I love you.'

## II

MARGUERITE'S cries had attracted attention, for all at once the door was opened, and a voice exclaimed: 'What is the matter, neighbour? Is he worse?'

I recognised the voice; it was that of an elderly woman, Madame Gabin, who occupied a room on the same floor. She had been most obliging since our arrival, and had evidently become interested in our concerns. On her own side she had lost no time in telling us her history. A stern landlord had sold her furniture during the previous winter to pay himself his rent, and since then she had resided at the lodging-house in the Rue Dauphine with her daughter Dédé, a child of ten. They both cut and pinked lamp-shades; and between them they earned at the utmost only two francs a day.

'Heavens! is it all over?' cried Madame Gabin, looking at me.

I realised that she was drawing nearer. She examined me, touched me, and turning to Marguerite murmured compassionately: 'Poor girl! poor girl!'

My wife, wearied out, was sobbing like a child. Madame Gabin lifted her, placed her in a dilapidated arm-chair near the fireplace, and proceeded to comfort her.

'Indeed you'll do yourself harm if you go on like this, my dear. It's no reason because your husband is gone that you should kill yourself with weeping. Sure enough, when I lost Gabin I was just like you. I remained three days without swallowing a morsel of food. But that

didn't help me—on the contrary, it pulled me down. Come, for the Lord's sake, be sensible ! ’

By degrees Marguerite grew calmer ; she was exhausted, and it was only at intervals that she gave way to a fresh flow of tears. Meanwhile the old woman had taken possession of the room with a sort of rough authority.

‘ Don't worry yourself,’ she said, as she bustled about. ‘ Neighbours must help each other. Luckily Dédé has just gone to take the work home. Ah, I see, your trunks are not yet all unpacked, but I suppose there is some linen in the chest of drawers—isn't there ? ’

I heard her pull a drawer open ; she must have taken out a napkin which she spread on the little table at the bedside. She then struck a match, which made me think that she was lighting one of the candles on the mantelpiece, and placing it near me as a religious rite. I could follow her movements in the room and divine all her actions.

‘ Poor gentleman,’ she muttered. ‘ Luckily I heard you sobbing, poor dear ! ’

Suddenly the vague light which my left eye had detected vanished. Madame Gabin had just closed my eyelids, but I had not felt her finger on my face. When I understood this I felt chilled.

The door had opened again, and Dédé, the child of ten, now rushed in, calling out in her shrill voice : ‘ Mother, mother ! Ah, I knew you would be here ! Look here, there's the money—three francs and four sous. I took back three dozen lamp-shades.’

‘ Hush, hush ! Hold your tongue,’ vainly repeated the mother, who, as the little girl chattered on, must have pointed to the bed, for I guessed that the child felt perplexed, and was backing towards the door.

‘ Is the gentleman asleep ? ’ she whispered.

‘Yes, yes—go and play,’ said Madame Gabin.

But the child did not go. She was, no doubt, staring at me with widely opened eyes, startled and vaguely comprehending. Suddenly she seemed convulsed with terror, and ran out, upsetting a chair.

‘He is dead, mother, he is dead!’ she gasped.

Profound silence followed. Marguerite, lying back in the arm-chair, had left off crying. Madame Gabin was still rummaging about the room, and talking under her breath.

‘Children know everything nowadays. Look at that girl. Heaven knows how carefully she’s brought up! When I send her on an errand, or to take the shades back, I calculate the time to a minute so that she can’t loiter about, but for all that she learns everything. She saw at a glance what had happened here—and yet I never showed her but one corpse, that of her uncle François, and she was then only four years old. Ah well! there are no children left—it can’t be helped.’

She paused, and without any transition passed to another subject.

‘I say, dearie, we must think of the formalities—there’s the declaration at the municipal offices to be made, and the seeing about the funeral. You are not in a fit state to attend to business. What do you say if I look in at Monsieur Simoneau’s to find out if he’s at home?’

Marguerite did not reply. It seemed to me that I watched her from afar, and at times changed into a subtle flame hovering above the room, while a stranger lay heavy and unconscious on my bed. I wished that Marguerite had declined the assistance of Simoneau. I had seen him three or four times during my brief illness, for he occupied a room close to ours, and had been civil and neighbourly. Madame Gabin had told us that he was merely making a short stay in Paris, having come to collect some old debts due to his father, who had settled in



the country and recently died. He was a tall, strong, handsome young man, and I hated him, perhaps on account of his healthy appearance. On the previous evening he had come in to make inquiries, and I had much disliked seeing him at Marguerite's side; she had looked so fair and pretty, and he had gazed so intently into her face when she smilingly thanked him for his kindness.

'Ah! here is Monsieur Simoneau,' said Madame Gabin, introducing him.

He gently pushed the door ajar, and as soon as Marguerite saw him enter she burst into a flood of tears. The presence of a friend, of the only person she knew in Paris besides the old woman, recalled her bereavement. I could not see the young man, but in the darkness that encompassed me I conjured up his appearance. I pictured him distinctly, grave and sad at finding poor Marguerite in such distress. How lovely she must have looked with her golden hair unbound, her pale face and her dear little baby hands burning with fever!

'I am at your disposal, madame,' he said softly. 'Pray allow me to manage everything.'

She only answered him with broken words, but as the young man was leaving, accompanied by Madame Gabin, I heard the latter mention money. These things were always expensive, she said, and she feared that the poor little body hadn't a farthing—anyhow, he might ask her. But Simoneau silenced the old woman; he did not want to have the widow worried; he was going to the municipal office and to the undertakers.

When silence reigned once more I wondered if my nightmare would last much longer. I was certainly alive, for I was conscious of passing incidents, and I began to realise my condition. I must have fallen into one of those cataleptic states that I had read of. As a child I had suffered from syncope which had lasted several



hours, but surely my heart would soon beat anew, my blood circulate and my muscles relax. Yes, I should wake up and comfort Marguerite ; and, reasoning thus, I tried to be patient.

Time passed. Madame Gabin had brought in some breakfast, but Marguerite refused to taste any food. Later on the afternoon waned. Through the open window I heard the rising clamour of the Rue Dauphine. By-and-by a slight ringing of the brass candlestick on the marble-topped table made me think that a fresh candle had been lighted. At last Simoneau returned.

‘ Well ? ’ whispered the old woman.

‘ It is all settled,’ he answered ; ‘ the funeral is ordered for to-morrow at eleven. There is nothing for you to do, and you needn’t talk of these things before the poor lady.’

Nevertheless Madame Gabin remarked : ‘ The doctor of the dead hasn’t come yet.’

Simoneau took a seat beside Marguerite, and after a few words of encouragement remained silent. The funeral was to take place at eleven ! Those words rang in my brain like a passing bell. And the doctor was coming—the doctor of the dead, as Madame Gabin had called him. *He* could not possibly fail to find out that I was only in a state of lethargy ; he would do whatever might be necessary to rouse me, so I longed for his arrival with feverish anxiety.

The day was drawing to a close. Madame Gabin, anxious to waste no time, had brought in her lamp-shades and summoned Dédé without asking Marguerite’s permission. ‘ To tell the truth,’ she observed, ‘ I do not like to leave children too long alone.’

‘ Come in, I say,’ she whispered to the little girl, ‘ come in, and don’t be frightened. Only don’t look towards the bed, or you’ll catch it.’

She thought it decorous to forbid Dédé to look at me,

but I was convinced that the child was furtively glancing at the corner where I lay, for every now and then I heard her mother rap her knuckles and repeat angrily: 'Get on with your work, or you shall leave the room, and the gentleman will come during the night and pull you by the feet.'

The mother and daughter had sat down at our table. I could plainly hear the click of their scissors as they clipped the lamp-shades, which no doubt required very delicate manipulation, for they did not work rapidly. I counted the shades one by one as they were laid aside, while my anxiety grew more and more intense.

The clicking of the scissors was the only noise in the room, so I concluded that Marguerite had been overcome by fatigue and was dozing. Twice Simoneau rose up, and the torturing thought flashed through me that he might be taking advantage of her slumbers to touch her hair with his lips. I hardly knew the man, and yet I felt sure that he loved my wife. At last little Dédé began to giggle, and her laugh exasperated me.

'Why are you sniggering, you idiot?' asked her mother. 'Do you want to be turned out on the landing? Come, out with it; what makes you laugh so?'

The child stammered: she had not laughed, she had only coughed; but I felt certain that she had seen Simoneau bending over Marguerite, and had felt amused.

The lamp had been lit, when a knock was heard at the door.

'It must be the doctor at last,' said the old woman.

It was the doctor; he did not apologise for coming so late, for he had no doubt ascended many flights of stairs during the day. The room being but imperfectly lighted by the lamp, he inquired: 'Is the body here?'

'Yes, it is,' answered Simoneau.

Marguerite had risen, trembling violently. Madame

Gabin dismissed Dédé, saying it was useless that a child should be present, and she then tried to lead my wife to the window, to spare her the sight of what was about to take place.

The doctor quickly approached the bed. I guessed that he was bored, tired, and impatient. Had he touched my wrist? had he placed his hand on my heart? I could not tell; but I fancied that he had only carelessly bent over me.

‘Shall I bring the lamp, so that you may see better?’ asked Simoneau obligingly.

‘No, it is not necessary,’ quietly answered the doctor.

Not necessary! That man held my life in his hands, and he did not think it worth while to proceed to a careful examination! I was not dead! I wanted to cry out that I was not dead!

‘At what o’clock did he die?’ asked the doctor.

‘At six this morning,’ volunteered Simoneau.

A feeling of frenzy and rebellion rose within me, bound as I was in seemingly iron chains. Oh, for the power of uttering one word, of moving a single limb!

‘This close weather is unhealthy,’ resumed the doctor; ‘nothing is more trying than these early spring days.’

And then he moved away. It was like my life departing. Screams, sobs, and insults were choking me, struggling in my convulsed throat, in which even my breath was arrested. The wretch! Turned into a mere machine by professional habits, he only came to a death-bed to accomplish a perfunctory formality; he knew nothing, his science was a lie, since he could not at a glance distinguish life from death—and now he was going—going!

‘Good-night, sir,’ said Simoneau.

There came a moment’s silence, the doctor was probably bowing to Marguerite, who had turned while Madame

Gabin was fastening the window. He left the room, and I heard his footsteps descending the stairs.

It was all over; I was condemned. My last hope had vanished with that man. If I did not wake before eleven on the morrow I should be buried alive. The horror of that thought was so great that I lost all consciousness of my surroundings—'twas something like a fainting fit in death. The last sound I heard was the clicking of the scissors handled by Madame Gabin and Dédé. The funeral vigil had begun; nobody spoke.

Marguerite had refused to retire to rest in the neighbour's room. She remained reclining in her arm-chair, with her beautiful face pale, her eyes closed, and her long lashes wet with tears, while before her in the gloom Simoneau sat silently watching her.

### III

I CANNOT describe my agony during the morning of the following day. I remember it as a hideous dream, in which my impressions were so ghastly and so confused that I could not formulate them. The persistent yearning for a sudden awakening increased my torture; and as the hour for the funeral drew nearer, my anguish became more poignant still.

It was only at daybreak that I had recovered a fuller consciousness of what was going on around me. The creaking of hinges first startled me out of my stupor. Madame Gabin had just opened the window. It must have been about seven o'clock, for I heard the cries of hawkers in the street, the shrill voice of a girl offering groundsel, and the hoarse voice of a man shouting 'Carrots!' The clamorous awakening of Paris pacified me at first. I could not



believe that I should be laid under the sod in the midst of so much life; and, besides, a sudden thought helped to calm me. It had just occurred to me that I had witnessed a case similar to my own while I was employed at the hospital of Guérande. A man had been sleeping for twenty-eight hours, the doctors hesitating in presence of his apparent lifelessness, when suddenly he had sat up in bed, and was almost at once able to rise. I myself had already been asleep for some twenty-five hours; if I awoke at ten I should still be in time.

I endeavoured to ascertain who was in the room and what was going on there. Dédé must have been playing on the landing, for once when the door opened I heard her shrill childish laughter outside. Simoneau must have retired, for nothing indicated his presence. Madame Gabin's slipshod tread was still audible over the floor. At last she spoke.

'Come, my dear,' she said. 'It is wrong of you not to take it while it is hot. It would cheer you up.'

She was addressing Marguerite, and a slow trickling sound as of something filtering indicated that she had been making some coffee.

'I don't mind owning,' she continued, 'that I needed it. At my age sitting up *is* trying. The night seems so dreary when there is a misfortune in the house. *Do* have a cup of coffee, my dear—just a drop.'

She persuaded Marguerite to taste it.

'Isn't it nice and hot?' she continued; 'and doesn't it set one up? Ah! you'll be wanting all your strength presently for what you've got to go through to-day. Now, if you were sensible you'd step into my room and just wait there.'

'No; I want to stay here,' said Marguerite resolutely.

Her voice, which I had not heard since the previous evening, touched me strangely. It was changed, broken



as by tears. To feel my dear wife near me was a last consolation. I knew that her eyes were fastened on me, and that she was weeping with all the anguish of her heart.

The minutes flew by. An inexplicable noise sounded from beyond the door. It seemed as if some people were bringing a bulky piece of furniture upstairs, and knocking against the walls as they did so. Suddenly I understood, as I heard Marguerite begin to sob : it was the coffin.

‘You are too early,’ said Madame Gabin crossly. ‘Put it behind the bed.’

What o’clock was it ? Nine, perhaps. So the coffin had come. Amid the opaque night around me I could see it plainly, quite new, with roughly planed boards. Heavens ! was this the end, then ? Was I to be borne off in that box which I realised was lying at my feet ?

However, I had one supreme joy. Marguerite, in spite of her weakness, insisted upon discharging all the last offices. Assisted by the old woman, she dressed me with all the tenderness of a wife and a sister. Once more I felt myself in her arms as she clothed me in various garments. She paused at times, overcome by grief ; she clasped me convulsively, and her tears rained on my face. Oh ! how I longed to return her embrace, and cry, ‘I live !’ And yet I was lying there powerless, motionless, inert !

‘You are very foolish,’ suddenly said Madame Gabin ; ‘it is all wasted.’

‘Never mind,’ answered Marguerite, sobbing. ‘I want him to wear his very best things.’

I understood that she was dressing me in the clothes I had worn on my wedding-day. I had kept them carefully for great occasions. When she had finished she fell back exhausted in the arm-chair.

Simoneau now spoke ; he had probably just entered the room.

‘They are below,’ he whispered.

‘Well, it ain’t any too soon,’ answered Madame Gabin, also lowering her voice. ‘Tell them to come up and get it over.’

‘But I dread the despair of the poor little wife.’

The old woman seemed to reflect and presently resumed: ‘Listen to me, Monsieur Simoneau. You must take her off to my room. I wouldn’t have her stop here. It is for her own good. When she is out of the way we’ll get it done in a jiffy.’

These words pierced my heart, and my anguish was intense when I realised that a struggle was actually taking place. Simoneau had walked up to Marguerite imploring her to leave the room.

‘Do, for pity’s sake, come with me!’ he pleaded. ‘Spare yourself useless pain.’

‘No, no!’ she cried, ‘I will remain till the last minute. Remember that I have only him in the world, and when he is gone I shall be all alone!’

From the bedside Madame Gabin was prompting the young man.

‘Don’t parley—take hold of her—carry her off in your arms.’

Was Simoneau about to lay his hands on Marguerite and bear her away? She screamed. I wildly endeavoured to rise, but the springs of my limbs were broken. I remained rigid, unable even to lift my eyelids to see what was going on. The struggle continued, and my wife clung to the furniture, repeating—‘Oh don’t, don’t! Have mercy! Let me go! I will not——’

He must have lifted her in his stalwart arms, for I heard her moaning like a child. He bore her away, her sobs were lost in the distance, and I fancied I saw them both—he, tall and strong, pressing her to his breast; she fainting, powerless and conquered, following him wherever he listed.

‘Drat it all! what a to-do!’ muttered Madame Gabin. ‘Now for the tug of war, as the coast is clear at last.’

In my jealous madness I looked upon this incident as a monstrous outrage. I had not been able to see Marguerite for twenty-four hours, but at least I had still heard her voice. Not even this was denied me; she had been torn away, a man had eloped with her even before I was laid under the sod. He was alone with her, on the other side of the wall, comforting her—embracing her perhaps!

But the door opened once more, and heavy footsteps shook the floor.

‘Quick, make haste,’ repeated Madame Gabin. ‘Get it done before the lady comes back.’

She was speaking to some strangers, who merely answered her with uncouth grunts.

‘You understand,’ she went on, ‘I am not a relation, I’m only a neighbour. I have no interest in the matter. It is out of pure good-nature that I have mixed myself up in their affairs. And it ain’t over cheerful, I can tell you. Yes, yes, I sat up the whole blessed night—it was pretty cold, too, about four o’clock. That’s a fact. Well, I have always been a fool—I’m too soft-hearted.’

The coffin had been dragged into the centre of the room. As I had not awakened I was condemned. All clearness departed from my ideas; everything seemed to revolve in a black haze; and I experienced such utter lassitude that it seemed almost a relief to leave off hoping.

‘They haven’t spared the material,’ said one of the undertaker’s men in a gruff voice. ‘The box is too long.’

‘He’ll have all the more room,’ said the other, laughing.

I was not heavy, and they chuckled over it since they had three flights of stairs to descend. As they were seizing me by the shoulders and feet, I heard Madame Gabin fly into a violent passion.

‘You cursed little brat,’ she screamed, ‘what do you mean by poking your nose where you’re not wanted? Look here, I’ll teach you to spy and pry.’

Dédé had slipped her tousled head through the doorway to see how the gentleman was being put into the box. Two ringing slaps resounded, however, followed by an explosion of sobs. And as soon as the mother returned she began to gossip about her daughter for the benefit of the two men who were settling me in the coffin.

‘She is only ten, you know. She is not a bad girl, but she is frightfully inquisitive. I do not beat her often, only I *will* be obeyed.’

‘Oh,’ said one of the men, ‘all kids are alike. Whenever there is a corpse lying about they always want to see it.’

I was commodiously stretched out, and I might have thought myself still in my bed, had it not been that my left arm felt a trifle cramped from being squeezed against a board. The men had been right. I was pretty comfortable inside on account of my diminutive stature.

‘Stop!’ suddenly exclaimed Madame Gabin. ‘I promised his wife to put a pillow under his head.’

The men, who were in a hurry, stuffed in the pillow roughly. One of them, who had mislaid his hammer, began to swear. He had left the tool below, and went to fetch it, dropping the lid; and when two sharp blows of the hammer drove in the first nail, a shock ran through my being—I had ceased to live. The nails then entered in rapid succession with a rhythmical cadence. It was as if some packers had been closing a case of dried fruit with easy dexterity. After that such sounds as reached me were deadened and strangely prolonged, as if the deal coffin had been changed into a huge musical-box. The last words spoken in the room of the Rue Dauphine—at least the last ones that I heard distinctly—were uttered by Madame Gabin.



‘Mind the staircase,’ she said; ‘the banister of the second flight isn’t safe, so be careful.’

While I was being carried down, I experienced a sensation similar to that of pitching, as when one is on board a ship in a rough sea. However, from that moment my impressions became more and more vague. I remember that the only distinct thought that still possessed me was an imbecile impulsive curiosity as to the road by which I should be taken to the cemetery. I was not acquainted with a single street of Paris, and I was ignorant of the position of the large burial grounds (though, of course, I had occasionally heard their names), and yet every effort of my mind was directed towards ascertaining whether we were turning to the right or to the left. Meanwhile, the jolting of the hearse, over the paving stones, the rumbling of passing vehicles, the steps of the foot-passengers, all created a confused clamour, intensified by the acoustical properties of the coffin.

At first I followed our course pretty closely; then came a halt. I was again lifted and carried about, and I concluded that we were in church; but when the funeral procession once more moved onwards, I lost all consciousness of the road we took. A ringing of bells informed me that we were passing another church, and then the softer and easier progress of the wheels indicated that we were skirting a garden or park. I was like a victim being taken to the gallows, awaiting in stupor a death-blow that never came.

At last they stopped and pulled me out of the hearse. The business proceeded rapidly. The noises had ceased; I knew that I was in a deserted space amid avenues of trees, and with the broad sky over my head. No doubt a few persons followed the bier, some of the inhabitants of the lodging-house perhaps—Simoneau and others, for instance—for faint whisperings reached my ear. Then I



heard a psalm chanted, and some Latin words mumbled by a priest, and afterwards I suddenly felt myself sinking, while the ropes rubbing against the edges of the coffin elicited lugubrious sounds as if a bow were being drawn across the strings of a cracked violoncello. It was the end. On the left side of my head I felt a violent shock like that produced by the bursting of a bomb; with another under my feet, and a third more violent still on my chest. So forcible indeed was this last one that I thought the lid was cleft atwain. I fainted from it.

#### IV

It is impossible for me to say how long my swoon lasted. Eternity is not of longer duration than one second spent in nihility. I was no more. It was slowly and confusedly that I regained some degree of consciousness. I was still asleep, but I began to dream; a nightmare started into shape amidst the blackness of my horizon; a nightmare compounded of a strange fancy which in other days had haunted my morbid imagination, whenever with my propensity for dwelling upon hideous thoughts I had conjured up catastrophes.

Thus I dreamed that my wife was expecting me somewhere—at Guérande, I believe—and that I was going to join her by rail. As we passed through a tunnel a deafening roll thundered over our head, and a sudden subsidence blocked up both issues of the tunnel, leaving our train intact in the centre. We were walled up by blocks of rock in the heart of a mountain. Then a long and fearful agony commenced. No assistance could possibly reach us; even with powerful engines and incessant labour it would take a month to clear the tunnel. We were prisoners

there with no outlet, and so our death was only a question of time.

My fancy had often dwelt on that hideous drama and had constantly varied the details and touches. My actors were men, women, and children; their number increased to hundreds, and they were ever furnishing me with new incidents. There were some provisions in the train, but these were soon exhausted, and the hungry passengers, if they did not actually devour human flesh, at least fought furiously over the last piece of bread. Sometimes an aged man was driven back with blows and slowly perished; a mother struggled like a she-wolf to keep three or four mouthfuls for her child. In my own compartment a bride and bridegroom were dying, clasped in each other's arms in mute despair.

The line was free along the whole length of the train, and people came and went, prowling round the carriages like beasts of prey in search of carrion. All classes were mingled together. A millionaire, a high functionary, it was said, wept on a workman's shoulder. The lamps had been extinguished from the first, and the engine fire was nearly out. To pass from one carriage to another it was necessary to grope about, and thus, too, one slowly reached the engine, recognisable by its enormous barrel, its cold motionless flanks, its useless strength, its grim silence in the overwhelming night. Nothing could be more appalling than this train entombed alive with its passengers perishing one by one.

I gloated over the ghastliness of each detail; howls resounded through the vault; somebody, whom one could not see, whose vicinity was not even suspected, would suddenly drop upon another's shoulder. But what affected me most of all was the cold and the want of air. I have never felt so chilled; a mantel of snow seemed to enwrap me, heavy moisture rained upon my skull, I was gasping; the

rocky vault appeared to crush my chest, the whole mountain was seemingly weighing upon me.

Suddenly a cry of deliverance sounded. For some time past we had fancied we could hear a dull sound, and we tried to hope that men were at work and that help was coming ; but it came not thus. One of the passengers, however, had discovered an air shaft in the tunnel, and crowding round we all saw this shaft, above which we could discern a blue patch about the size of a wafer. That blue patch filled us with rapture, for it was the sky. We stretched ourselves and stood on tip-toes to breathe more freely. Then we distinguished some black specks moving about, specks that must surely be workmen about to deliver us. A furious clamour arose. The cry, ' Saved ! saved ! ' burst from every mouth, while trembling arms were uplifted towards the tiny azure patch above.

That roar of voices aroused me. Where was I ? In the tunnel, of course. I was lying at full length, hard walls were pressing against my ribs. Then I attempted to rise and struck my head roughly. Was it the rock closing in on all sides ? The blue speck had vanished—ay, the sky had disappeared—and I was still suffocating, shivering, with chattering teeth.

All at once I remembered. Intense horror raised my hair on end. I felt the hideous truth freeze me from head to foot like ice. I had shaken off the long coma which for so many hours had stricken me with corpse-like rigidity. Yes, I could move ; my hands could feel the boards of my coffin, my lips parted, words came to me, and instinctively I called out Marguerite's name. It was a scream I raised. In that deal box my voice took so hoarse and weird a sound that it terrified me. Oh, my God ! was this thing true ? I was able to walk, speak, cry out that I was living, and yet my voice could not be heard ; I was entombed under the earth.

I made a desperate effort to remain calm and reflect. Was there no means of getting out? Then my dream began afresh in my troubled brain. The fanciful air-shaft, with the blue bit of sky overhead, was mingled with the real grave in which I was lying. I stared at the darkness with widely opened eyes; perhaps I might discover a hole, a slit, a glimmer of light; but only sparks of fire flitted through that night, with rays that broadened and then faded away. I was in a sombre abyss again. With returning lucidity I struggled against these fatal visions. Indeed, I should need all my reason if I meant to try to save myself.

The most immediate peril lay in an increasing sense of suffocation. If I had been able to live so long without air, it was owing to suspended animation, which had changed all the normal conditions of my existence; but now that my heart beat and my lungs breathed, I should die asphyxiated if I did not promptly liberate myself. I also suffered from cold, and dreaded lest I should succumb to the mortal numbness of those who fall asleep in the snow never to wake again. Still, while unceasingly realising the necessity of remaining calm, I felt maddening blasts sweep through my brain; and to quiet my senses I exhorted myself to patience, trying to remember the circumstances of my burial. Probably the ground had been bought for five years, and this would be against my chances of self-deliverance, for I remembered having noticed at Nantes that in the trenches of the common graves one end of the last lowered coffins protruded into the next open cavity, in which case I should only have had to break through one plank. But if I were in a separate hole, filled up above me with earth, the obstacles would prove too great. Had I not been told that the dead were buried six feet deep in Paris? How was I to get through the enormous mass of soil above me? Even if I succeeded



in slitting the lid of my bier open, the mould would drift in like fine sand and fill my mouth and eyes. That would be death again, a ghastly death, like drowning in mud.

However, I began to feel the planks carefully. The coffin was roomy, and I found that I was able to move my arms with tolerable ease. On both sides the roughly planed boards were stout and resistive. I slipped my arm on to my chest to raise it over my head. There I discovered in the top plank a knot in the wood which yielded slightly at my pressure. Working laboriously I finally succeeded in driving out this knot, and on passing my finger through the hole I found that the earth above was wet and clayey. But that availed me little. I even regretted having removed the knot, vaguely dreading the irruption of the mould. A second experiment occupied me for a while. I tapped all over the coffin to ascertain if perchance there were any vacuum outside. But the sound was everywhere the same. At last, as I was slightly kicking the foot of the coffin, I fancied that it gave out a clearer echoing noise ; but that might merely be produced by the sonority of the wood.

At any rate I began to press against the boards with my arms and my closed fists. In the same way too I used my knees, my back, and my feet without eliciting even a creak from the wood. I strained with all my strength ; indeed with so desperate an effort of my whole frame, that my bruised bones seemed breaking. But nothing moved and I became insane.

Until that moment I had held delirium at bay. I had mastered the intoxicating rage which was mounting to my head like the fumes of alcohol ; I had silenced my screams, for I feared that if I again cried out aloud I should be undone. But now I yelled, I shouted ; unearthly howls which I could not repress came from my relaxed throat. I called for help in a voice that I did not recognise, growing wilder with each fresh appeal, and crying out that I would



not die. I also tore at the wood with my nails ; I writhed with the contortions of a caged wolf. I do not know how long this fit of madness lasted, but I can still feel the relentless hardness of the box that imprisoned me ; I can still hear the storm of shrieks and sobs with which I filled it ; a remaining glimmer of reason made me try to stop, but I could not do so.

Great exhaustion followed. I lay waiting for death in a state of somnolent pain. The coffin was like stone, which no effort could break, and the conviction that I was powerless left me unnerved, without courage to make any fresh attempts. Another suffering—hunger—was presently added to cold and want of air. The torture soon became intolerable. With my finger I tried to pull small pinches of earth through the hole of the dislodged knot, and I swallowed them eagerly, only increasing my torment. Tempted by my flesh, I bit my arms and sucked my skin with a fiendish desire to drive my teeth in ; but I was afraid of drawing blood.

Then I ardently longed for death. All my life long I had trembled at the thought of dissolution, but I had come to yearn for it, to crave for an everlasting night that could never be dark enough. How childish it had been of me to dread the long dreamless sleep, the eternity of silence and gloom ! Death was kind, for in suppressing life it put an end to suffering. Oh ! to sleep like the stones, to be no more !

With groping hands I still continued feeling the wood, and suddenly I pricked my left thumb. That slight pain roused me from my growing numbness. What could have caused it ? I felt again, and found a nail—a nail which the undertaker's men had driven in crookedly and which had not caught in the lower wood. It was long and very sharp ; the head] was secured to the lid, but it moved. Henceforth I had but one idea—to possess myself of that

nail; and I slipped my right hand across my body and began to shake it. I made but little progress, however, it was a difficult job; for my hands soon tired, and I had to use them alternately. The left one, too, was of little use, on account of the nail's awkward position.

While I was obstinately persevering, a plan dawned on my mind. That nail meant salvation, and I must have it. But should I get it in time? Hunger was torturing me, my brain was swimming, my limbs were losing their strength, my mind was becoming confused. I had sucked the drops that trickled from my punctured finger, and suddenly I bit my arm and drank my own blood! Thereupon, spurred on by pain, revived by the tepid acrid liquor that moistened my lips, I tore desperately at the nail and at last I wrenched it off!

I then believed in success. My plan was a simple one: I pushed the point of the nail into the lid, dragging it along as far as I could in a straight line, and working it so as to make a slit in the wood. My fingers stiffened, but I doggedly persevered, and when I fancied that I had sufficiently cut into the board I turned on my stomach, and lifting myself on my knees and elbows thrust the whole strength of my back against the lid. But although it creaked, it did not yield; the notched line was not deep enough. I had to resume my old position—which I only managed to do with infinite trouble—and work afresh. At last, after another supreme effort, the lid was cleft from end to end.

• I was not saved as yet, but my heart beat with renewed hope. I had ceased pushing and remained motionless, lest a sudden fall of earth should bury me. I intended to use the lid as a screen, and thus protected to open a sort of shaft in the clayey soil. Unfortunately I was assailed by unexpected difficulties. Some heavy clods of earth weighed upon the boards and made them unmanageable: I foresaw

that I should never reach the surface in that way, for the mass of soil was already bending my spine and crushing my face.

Once more I stopped affrighted ; then suddenly, while I was stretching out my legs trying to find something firm against which I might rest my feet, I felt the end board of the coffin yielding. I at once gave a desperate kick with my heels, in the faint hope that there might be a freshly dug grave in that direction.

It was so. My feet abruptly forced their way into space. An open grave was there ; I had only a slight partition of earth to displace, and soon I rolled into the cavity. I was saved !

I remained for a time lying on my back in the open grave, with my eyes raised to heaven. It was dark, the stars were shining in a sky of velvety blueness. Now and then the rising breeze wafted a spring-like freshness, a perfume of foliage upon me. I was saved ! I could breathe, I felt warm ; and I wept, and I stammered, with my arms prayerfully extended towards the starry sky. O God ! how sweet seemed life !

## V

My first impulse was to find the custodian of the cemetery and ask him to have me conducted home, but various thoughts that came to me restrained me from following that course. My return would create general alarm ; why should I hurry now that I was master of the situation ? I felt my limbs ; I had only an insignificant wound on my left arm, where I had bitten myself ; and a slight feverishness lent me unhopèd-for strength. I should no doubt be able to walk unaided.

Still I lingered ; all sorts of dim visions confused my

mind. I had felt beside me in the open grave some sextons' tools which had been left there, and I conceived a sudden desire to repair the damage I had done, to close up the hole through which I had crept, so as to conceal all traces of my resurrection. I do not believe that I had any positive motive in doing so. I only deemed it useless to proclaim my adventure aloud, feeling ashamed to find myself alive when the whole world thought me dead. In half an hour every trace of my escape was obliterated, and then I climbed out of the hole.

The night was splendid, and deep silence reigned in the cemetery; the black trees threw motionless shadows over the white tombs. When I endeavoured to ascertain my bearings, I noticed that one half of the sky was ruddy as if lit up by a huge conflagration; Paris lay in that direction, and I moved towards it, following a long avenue, amid the darkness of the branches.

However, after I had gone some fifty yards I was compelled to stop, feeling faint and weary. I then sat down on a stone bench, and for the first time looked at myself. I was fully attired with the exception that I had no hat. I blessed my beloved Marguerite for the pious thought which had prompted her to dress me in my best clothes--those which I had worn at our wedding. That remembrance of my wife brought me to my feet again. I longed to see her without delay.

At the further end of the avenue I had taken, a wall arrested my progress. However, I climbed to the top of a monument, reached the summit of the wall, and then dropped over the other side. Although roughly shaken by the fall, I managed to walk for a few minutes along a broad deserted street skirting the cemetery. I had no notion as to where I might be, but with the reiteration of monomania I kept saying to myself that I was going towards Paris, and that I should find the Rue Dauphine



somehow or other. Several people passed me but, seized with sudden distrust, I would not stop them and ask my way. I have since realised that I was then in a burning fever, and already nearly delirious. Finally, just as I reached a large thoroughfare, I became giddy and fell heavily upon the pavement.

Here there is a blank in my life. For three whole weeks I remained unconscious. When I awoke at last I found myself in a strange room. A man who was nursing me told me quietly that he had picked me up one morning on the Boulevard Montparnasse, and had brought me to his house. He was an old doctor who had given up practising.

When I attempted to thank him, he sharply answered that my case had seemed a curious one, and that he had wished to study it. Moreover, during the first few days of my convalescence he would not allow me to ask a single question; and later on, he never put one to me. For eight days longer I remained in bed, feeling very weak, and not even trying to remember, for memory was a weariness and a pain. I felt half ashamed and half afraid. As soon as I could leave the house I would go and find out whatever I wanted to know. Possibly in the delirium of fever a name had escaped me; however, the doctor never alluded to anything I may have said. His charity was not only generous, it was discreet.

The summer had come at last, and one warm June morning I was at last permitted to take a short walk. The sun was shining with that joyous brightness which imparts renewed youth to the streets of old Paris. I went along slowly, questioning the passers-by at every crossing I came to, and asking the way to the Rue Dauphine. When I reached the street I had some difficulty in recognising the lodging-house where we had alighted on our arrival in the capital. A childish terror made me hesitate.



If I appeared suddenly before Marguerite, the shock might kill her. It might be wiser to begin by revealing myself to our neighbour, Madame Gabin ; still I shrank from taking a third party into confidence. I seemed unable to arrive at a resolution, and yet in my innermost heart I felt a great void, like that left by some sacrifice long since consummated.

The building looked quite yellow in the sunshine. I had just recognised it by a shabby eating-house on the ground floor, where we had ordered our meals, having them sent up to us. Then I raised my eyes to the last window of the third floor on the left-hand side, and as I looked at it a young woman with tumbled hair, wearing a loose dressing-gown, appeared and leant her elbows on the sill. A young man followed and printed a kiss upon her neck. It was not Marguerite. Still I felt no surprise. It seemed to me that I had dreamt all this, with other things too, which I was to learn presently.

For a moment I remained in the street, uncertain whether I had better go upstairs and question the lovers, who were still laughing in the sunshine. However, I decided to enter the little restaurant below. When I started on my walk, the old doctor had placed a five-franc piece in my hand. No doubt I was changed beyond recognition, for my beard had grown during the brain fever, and my face was wrinkled and haggard. As I took a seat at a small table, I saw Madame Gabin come in carrying a cup ; she wished to buy a penny-worth of coffee. Standing in front of the counter, she began to gossip with the landlady of the establishment.

‘Well,’ asked the latter, ‘so the poor little woman of the third floor has made up her mind at last, eh?’

‘How could she help herself?’ answered Madame Gabin ‘it was the very best thing for her to do. Monsieur Simoneau showed her so much kindness. You see, he had

finished his business in Paris to his satisfaction, for he has inherited a pot of money. Well, he offered to take her away with him to his own part of the country, and place her with an aunt of his, who wants a housekeeper and companion.'

The landlady laughed archly. I buried my face in a newspaper which I picked off the table. My lips were white and my hands shook.

'It will end in a marriage of course,' resumed Madame Gabin. 'The little widow mourned for her husband very properly, and the young man was extremely well-behaved. Well, they left last night—and after all they were free to please themselves.'

Just then the side door of the restaurant communicating with the passage of the house opened, and Dédé appeared.

'Mother, ain't you coming?' she cried. 'I'm waiting, you know; do be quick.'

'Presently,' said the mother testily. 'Don't bother.'

The girl stood listening to the two women, with the precocious shrewdness of a child born and reared amid the streets of Paris.

'When all is said and done,' explained Madame Gabin, 'the dear departed did not come up to Monsieur Simoneau. I didn't fancy him over much; he was a puny sort of a man, a poor fretful fellow—and he hadn't a penny to bless himself with. No, candidly, he wasn't the kind of husband for a young and healthy wife, whereas Monsieur Simoneau is rich, you know, and as strong as a Turk.'

'Oh yes!' interrupted Dédé, 'I saw him once when he was washing—his door was open. His arms are so hairy!'

'Get along with you,' screamed the old woman, shoving the girl out of the restaurant. 'You are always poking your nose where it has no business to be.'

Then she concluded with these words : ' Look here, to my mind the other one did quite right to take himself off. It was fine luck for the little woman ! '

When I found myself in the street again, I walked along slowly with trembling limbs. And yet I was not suffering much ; I think I smiled once at my shadow in the sun. It was quite true. I *was* very puny. It had been a queer notion of mine to marry Marguerite. I recalled her weariness at Guérande, her impatience, her dull, monotonous life. The dear creature had been very good to me, but I had never been a real lover ; she had mourned for me as a sister for her brother, not otherwise. Why should I again disturb her life ? A dead man is not jealous.

When I lifted my eyelids I saw the garden of the Luxembourg before me. I entered it, and took a seat in the sun, dreaming with a sense of infinite restfulness. The thought of Marguerite stirred me softly. I pictured her in the provinces beloved, petted, and very happy. She had grown handsomer, and she was the mother of three boys and two girls. It was all right. I had behaved like an honest man in dying, and I would not commit the cruel folly of coming to life again.

Since then I have travelled a good deal. I have been a little bit everywhere. I am an ordinary man who has toiled and eaten like anybody else. Death no longer frightens me, but it does not seem to care for me now that I have no motive in living ; and I sometimes fear that I have been forgotten upon earth.

# JACQUES DAMOUR

## I

OVER yonder at Nouméa, when Jacques Damour gazed at the blank horizon of the sea, he sometimes fancied he saw passing over it all his past history—the miseries of the German siege, the wrath of the Commune, the disruption which had cast him so far, bruised and stunned. It was not a clear vision of memories over which he lingered tenderly; his was the dull brooding of a darkened intellect returning mechanically to certain facts which alone started out sharp and precise from amidst general ruin.

At twenty-seven years of age Jacques had married Félicie, a tall, handsome girl of eighteen, the niece of a fruiterer at La Villette, of whom he had hired a room. Jacques was an engraver on metals, and at times earned as much as twelve francs a day. His wife had tried dress-making, but a baby having come, it was as much as she could do to nurse her boy and look after her household. Eugène was a strong, healthy little fellow, but nine years later a girl was born, who for a long time remained so puny and sickly that she cost a great deal in doctors and physic. Still they were not unhappy. Damour, it is true, would now and then loaf about on a Monday, but when he had been drinking he had the good sense to go to bed, and

on the following morning he would return to his work, blaming himself severely as a ne'er-do-well. When Eugène was twelve years old he had learned enough of his father's calling to earn his living, although he could barely read or write. Félicie kept her rooms scrupulously clean; she became a thrifty and clever housewife, somewhat of a screw, the father would say, giving them more vegetables than meat, so as to put by something for a rainy day. They lived at Menilmontant, in the Rue des Envierges, occupying a set of three rooms, one for the father and mother, one for Eugène, and a sitting-room, where the vice, benches, and tools were kept; they also had a kitchen, and a small closet for Louise. The flat was reached by a yard, and was situated in a rear building, but they had plenty of air, as the windows overlooked an open stretch of waste ground, where from morning till night carts came and emptied bricks, stones, and old boards, the refuse of demolished houses.

When war broke out with Germany the Damours had been living for ten years in the Rue des Envierges. Félicie was now nearly forty, but she was still young-looking and plump; indeed, the roundness of her hips and shoulders made her the handsomest woman in the neighbourhood. Jacques, on the contrary, was, as it were, desiccated, and the eight years' difference in age between them made him already look an old man beside his wife. Louise, although no longer in danger, was still thin and delicate, resembling her father, while Eugène, then nineteen years old, had his mother's tall figure and broad back. They lived in perfect union, save for those unfortunate Mondays, when father and son lingered in the wine shops, and Félicie sulked, furious at the misspent money. Two or three times they even came to blows, but it did not amount to much, and on the whole there was not a more respectable or more united family in the



house. They were quoted as a bright example. When the Germans marched upon Paris, and the terrible stoppage of work began, they had over a thousand francs in the savings bank. This was a large sum for a working couple who had reared two children.

Thus the first months of the siege were not very hard to bear. In the parlour, where the tools lay idle, bread and meat still appeared upon the table. Touched also by the penury of a neighbour, a stalwart house-painter called Berru, who was starving, Damour asked him to share their dinner several times, and soon, indeed, the neighbour dropped in regularly at all the meals. He was a larky fellow, full of chaff and fun, and contrived to get round Félicie, who at first had looked angrily and distrustfully at his big hungry mouth, in which the largest and best morsels vanished. At night they played cards and abused the Prussians. Berru, who was a patriot, talked of digging tunnels, subterranean passages through the country abutting under the enemy's batteries at Châtillon and Montretout, and then blowing them all up. He denounced the Government as a pack of cowards, who would throw open the gates of Paris to Bismarck in view of placing Henri V.—the Count de Chambord—on the throne. The Republic as managed by those traitors made him shrug his shoulders. Ah, the Republic! Then, with both elbows on the table and his short pipe in his mouth, he explained to Damour his own ideas of what a Government ought to be—all brothers—all free—all rich—justice and equality reigning everywhere amid high and low.

'Like '93!' he added squarely, not knowing, however, what he meant.

Damour remained grave. He, too, was a Republican, for from his cradle he had heard it asserted that the Republic would one day bring about the triumph of the working classes and universal bliss; however, he had no

real notion of the manner in which it was all to happen. He listened attentively to Berru, finding his reasoning exceedingly good, and admitting that such a Republic as he expected would no doubt come some day. He became interested, and even excited in the controversy, firmly believing that if all the Parisians, men, women, and children, had marched to Versailles singing the *Marseillaise*, the Prussians would have been routed. Yes, the Parisians would have shaken hands with the provinces, and the Government of the people, which was bound to give every citizen an income, would have been established.

‘Beware !’ said Félicie, with secret misgivings ; ‘your Berru will lead you into mischief. Feed him, if you want to do so, but let him go and get his skull cracked without your help.’

She, too, wanted the Republic. In '48 her father had been killed on a barricade, but the memory of that death, instead of maddening her, made her reasonable. If *she* had been the mob, she knew how she would have compelled the Government to be just—she would have behaved irreproachably. Berru's speeches caused her as much indignation as alarm ; she found them deficient in honesty. She also noticed uneasily that Damour was changed ; that he assumed a manner and used words she did not like ; and she became still more anxious when she remarked the sombre ardent looks with which her son Eugène listened to Berru. At night time, when Louise had fallen asleep with her head on the table, the young man, after slowly sipping a little glass of brandy, would fold his arms and mutely fix his eyes on the painter, who daily returned from his rambles through Paris with some extraordinary tale of treachery—Bonapartists had signalled to the Germans from Montmartre, or sacks of flour and barrels of powder had been cast into the Seine, so that the city might be forced to surrender.

‘What nonsense!’ said Félicie to her son as soon as Berru had made up his mind to leave them; ‘don’t put such stuff into your head, my boy; you know he lies.’

‘I know what I know,’ answered Eugène, with a furious gesture.

Towards the middle of December the Damours had got to the end of their savings, but as it was hourly proclaimed that the Germans had been defeated in the provinces, or that a victorious sortie had at last liberated Paris, the little household was at first not much alarmed, being upheld by the daily hope that work would soon begin again. Félicie accomplished miracles of thrift, and they lived as best they could on the black siege bread, which little Louise alone could not digest. It was about this time that Damour and Eugène became distracted, or, as the mother said, completely lost their heads. Having nothing to do from morning till night, with all their habits altered, they spent their days in a wearied, troubled idleness, haunted by dreams full of grotesque and sanguinary visions. They had both enlisted in a marching battalion, which, like many others, never left the fortifications, remaining quartered at a spot, where the men spent their time playing cards. It was there that Damour, suffering from hunger, his heart rent by the thought of his family’s misery, listened to the reports bandied about on all sides, and acquired the conviction that the Government was determined to exterminate the people and do away with the Republic. Berru was right; everyone knew that Henri V. was at St. Germain, in a house over which the white flag was flying. But all this could not last much longer. Some fine morning they would go and shoot the vermin that starved the working classes and allowed them to be bombarded—just to make room for priests and nobles. When Damour and Eugène came home, fevered

by the insane delirium of the streets, they talked of nothing but wholesale butchery; while Félicie, pale and dumb, tended little Louise, who had fallen ill again, affected by the bad diet.

At last the siege ended, the armistice was signed, and one day the Germans trooped along the Champs-Élysées. In the Rue des Envierges they again ate white bread which Félicie had gone to buy at St. Denis; still, the dinner proved dreary. Eugène, who had been to look at the Germans, was giving some particulars, when Damour, waving his fork, shouted out furiously that all the generals ought to be guillotined. Félicie thereupon got angry and took his fork away. The following days, as the workshops did not open, Damour decided to begin work on his own account; he had a few articles on hand, among others, a pair of candlesticks, which he meant to finish carefully and try to sell. At the end of an hour, however, Eugène, who felt unable to remain quiet, threw down his tools. As for Berru, he had disappeared since the armistice, having no doubt found more liberal board elsewhere. One morning, however, he returned in a state of great excitement, and related the story of the cannon of Montmartre.<sup>1</sup> Barricades were being erected on all sides, said he, the triumph of the people was at hand, and he had come to fetch Damour, as all good citizens were wanted. Damour at once rose from his bench, utterly disregarding the anxious, troubled looks of Félicie.

The days of March, April, and May followed. When Damour was worn out with fatigue, and his wife implored

<sup>1</sup> These were guns which belonged to the armament of Paris, and should rightly have been given up to the Germans after the capitulation. But various disaffected battalions of the National Guard retained possession of them, and when the Government endeavoured to secure them, an outbreak occurred, leading finally to the establishment of the Commune of Paris.—*Ed.*



him to stop at home, he answered: 'And my thirty sous ?<sup>1</sup> Who would give us bread ?'

Félicie silently bowed her head. The thirty sous of the father and the thirty sous of the son, occasionally supplemented by distributions of bread and salted meat, were all they had to live upon. Damour was convinced of the righteousness of his cause, and he fired on the Versailles troops as he would have fired on the Prussians, persuaded that he was saving the Republic and assuring the welfare of the people. After the misery and the fatigues of the German siege, the commotion of civil war gave him a sensation of nightmare amid which he struggled, like an obscure hero who was resolved to die for the defence of Liberty. He did not enter into any of the complex theories about the Commune ; in his eyes the Commune was simply the prophesied golden era, the dawn of universal felicity ; and he believed with even greater obstinacy that somewhere, at St. Germain or Versailles, there was a king ready to revive the Inquisition and feudal privileges, provided he were permitted to enter Paris. He, who would not willingly have crushed an insect at home, picked off the gendarmes at the outposts without the slightest hesitation. When he returned to Menilmontant exhausted, grimy with sweat and powder, he sat for hours by the side of little Louise's cot, listening to her laboured breathing. Félicie no longer attempted to oppose him, but waited for the end of the cataclysm with the calm shrewdness of her practical mind.

One day, however, she ventured to remark that that big, hulking Berru who bragged so loudly had not been such a simpleton as to put himself within gun-shot. He had been shrewd enough to get a post in the commissariat, which did not prevent him, whenever he came in his

<sup>1</sup> His daily pay of a franc and a half as a National Guard.—*Ed.*



belaced uniform, from exciting Damour with fanatical speeches, talking freely of shooting the Ministers, the members of the Legislature, in fact, all the Reactionaries, as soon as they should be captured at Versailles.

‘Why doesn’t he go himself, instead of sending others?’ argued Félicie, after some such speech.

‘Hold your tongue,’ answered Damour. ‘I am doing my duty; so much the worse for those who don’t do theirs.’

One morning, towards the close of April, Eugène was brought back to the Rue des Envierges on a stretcher. A bullet had struck him in the chest, and he expired as they were carrying him up the stairs. When Damour came home at night he found Félicie standing in silence by the corpse of their son. It was a terrible blow for him; he sank to the floor, and remained there sobbing, huddled against the wall. His wife did not attempt to comfort him, she never spoke, for she had nothing to say; still, if she had opened her lips involuntarily, she would have cried, ‘It is your doing!’ She had closed the door of Louise’s closet, so that the noise should not frighten the child. Even now she went to see if the father’s sobs had not wakened Louise. When Damour rose up he walked to the mantel-piece, and gazed at a photograph of Eugène, representing the young man in his uniform of the National Guard. Then he took a pen and wrote at the back of the portrait, ‘I will avenge you!’ adding the date and his signature. After that he felt relieved. The next day a hearse draped with large red flags conveyed the body to the Père Lachaise Cemetery, followed by an enormous crowd. The father walked bare-headed behind the coffin, and the sight of the flags, of their bloody purple adorning the black bier, swelled his heart with wild, sinister thoughts. Félicie had remained at home with Louise. That same evening Damour returned to the outposts to pick off some more gendarmes.

At last the days of May began. The army of Versailles entered Paris. Damour did not come home for two days, but fell back with his battalion, defending the barricades amid the conflagration. He knew nothing of what went on, but fired through the smoke because it was his duty to do so. On the morning of the third day he reappeared in the Rue des Envierges; his clothes were in rags, and he staggered and seemed stupefied like a drunken man. Félicie was helping him to undress, and washing his hands with a wet towel, when a neighbour rushed in saying that the Communists still held Père Lachaise Cemetery, and that the Versaillais were unable to dislodge them.

‘I’ll go there, then,’ said Damour simply.

He again dressed and caught up his gun. But the last defenders of the Commune were not on the plateau, near the spot where Eugène slept. Damour had vaguely hoped to get killed on his son’s grave, but he did not get so far. Bombs were falling, splintering the big tombs. Between the beeches, hidden by the marble whitening in the sun, a few National Guardsmen were still firing in a desultory fashion on the soldiers, whose red trousers were seen advancing. Damour joined his confederates just in time to be captured. Thirty-seven of his companions were shot at once;<sup>1</sup> he himself escaping this summary justice almost by a miracle. As his wife had washed his hands and his gun was not loaded, his life was spared; but in the stupor of his exhaustion and horror he never quite remembered the events that followed, they hovered about in his memory like the perplexing dreams of delirium: long hours passed in dark cells, dreary marches under the sun, yells, blows, staring crowds open-

<sup>1</sup> Historical. As is well known, it was General de Galliffet who gave the order. — *Ed.*

ing to see him pass. . . . When he at last shook off his crazy imbecility he was a prisoner at Versailles.

Félicie, always pale and calm, came to see him ; but when she had told him that Louise was better, they remained speechless, having nothing more to say. As she was going away she informed him, by way of encouragement, that his case was being investigated, and that he would surely come out safe.

‘ And Berru ? ’ he asked.

‘ Oh ! Berru is all right,’ she answered. ‘ He got away on the day before the troops entered Paris ; they won’t even trouble him.’

A month later Damour started for New Caledonia ; he had been condemned to transportation. As he held no rank, the court-martial before which he appeared would probably have acquitted him, had he not quietly admitted that he had fought and fired from the beginning of the insurrection. During their last interview he said to Félicie : ‘ I shall come back. Wait for me with the little one.’

And these were the words that Damour heard most clearly amid the confusion of his memory, as he sat with drooping head, before the blank horizon of the sea. At times night fell and found him still in the same spot. Afar a brighter line lingered like the furrow of a ship cutting athwart the increasing darkness, and it seemed to him as if he must rise and walk on that white road, since he had promised to return.

## II

AT Nouméa Damour behaved fairly well. He found work, and was told that he might expect a pardon. He was gentle and fond of playing with children ; he no longer meddled with politics ; he kept aloof from his companions, living quite alone. His only failing was that he drank

occasionally ; still, even in his cups he remained quiet and good-natured, shedding copious tears and retiring to bed of his own accord. His pardon appeared certain, when suddenly he disappeared. The surprise was great when it was found that he had run away with four of his comrades. During his two years of exile he had received several letters from Félicie, regularly at first, but less frequently later on. He himself wrote often. At last, three months having elapsed without bringing him any news, he grew desperate at the thought of waiting for a pardon that might be delayed for two years longer, and in one of those moments of frenzy which are so bitterly rued afterwards he risked everything. A week later, some leagues off, a shattered boat was found on the shore, and near it were the bodies of three of the fugitives—quite naked and in an advanced state of decomposition. Some witnesses declared that one of the corpses was Damour's ; it was of the same stature, and the beard looked like his. After a hasty inquiry the necessary formalities were carried out : a certificate of death was drawn up, and at the request of the widow who had been duly informed by the authorities, a duplicate was sent to her. The whole press teemed with this adventure, and a dramatic account of the escape and its tragic ending circulated through the newspapers of the whole world.

Nevertheless Damour was alive. One of his fellow-prisoners had been mistaken for him—a circumstance which was all the more singular as the two men were not in the least like one another ; only each wore a long beard. Damour and the fourth man, who also had miraculously survived, parted company as soon as they reached Australia. They never met again, and probably the other poor devil died of yellow fever, which very nearly carried off Damour himself. His first intention had been to inform Félicie of his whereabouts by letter,



but, having come across a newspaper narrating his escape and death, he thought to himself that it would be imprudent to write ; a letter might be intercepted—read, and then the truth revealed. Would it not be better to remain dead to the world ? Nobody would then suspect him, and he might quietly return to France and wait for an amnesty before confessing his identity. It was just then that a severe attack of yellow fever prostrated him for many weeks on a hospital bed.

When Damour became convalescent he experienced unconquerable lassitude ; for many months he remained very weak and absolutely purposeless. The fever had seemingly swept all his old desires away ; he cared for nothing, he wanted nothing ; the images of Félicie and Louise were blurred ; he still saw them, but at a great distance, in a fog, as it were, and at times he hardly recognised them. Certainly, as soon as his strength returned he meant to start and seek them, but suddenly, when he found himself once more on his legs, another idea possessed him. Before joining his wife and daughter he would make a fortune. What could he do in Paris ? Starve over his engraving work, and he might not even find any to do ; besides, he felt dreadfully aged. On the other hand, if he went to America, he might, in a few months, gain a hundred thousand francs ; a modest sum with which he would rest content, notwithstanding the prodigious tales of millions which were constantly buzzing in his ears. He had been told of a gold mine where every man, even the humblest navvy, had been able to drive a coach and pair before six months had passed. He arranged his future life : he would go back to France with his little pile, buy a small house near Vincennes, and, forgotten, happy, and well rid of politics, settle down there on an income of four or five thousand francs with Félicie and Louise. Four weeks later Damour was in America.



Then began an up-and-down existence, in which chance whirled him at haphazard into a turmoil of adventures at once vulgar and strange; he knew every kind of misery, touched every kind of fortune; three times he thought he had grasped his hundred thousand francs, three times they melted in his fingers; he was robbed, or he ruined himself in the last supreme effort. He suffered, toiled, and at last remained without a shirt to his back. After wandering to the four corners of the world, fate finally threw him on English soil; thence he drifted to Belgium, to the very frontier of France, but he no longer wished to cross it. From America he had written to Félicie, but, as three letters had elicited no answer, he felt justified in thinking that she was either dead or had left Paris. A year later he had made another fruitless attempt to get some news of her. In order not to betray himself, if his correspondence were opened, he had written under an assumed name about some fictitious business, calculating that Félicie would recognise his handwriting, and understand. Her continued silence paralysed his memory, as it were; he felt dead, as if he belonged to nobody, as if nothing mattered any more. During the year that he spent in Belgium he worked in a coal mine, underground, without seeing the sun, just sleeping and eating, and wishing for naught else. At last, one evening in a pot-house he heard some one say that an amnesty had just been voted, and that all the exiled Communists were returning home. This roused him; he felt a sudden thrill, a desire to look once more upon the street where he had lived so long.

At first it was merely an instinctive impulse; but while he was in the train carrying him to Paris his brain worked, and he realised that he might once again resume his place in the broad daylight, if he could only succeed in finding Félicie and Louise. New hopes dawned in his

heart; he was free, he could boldly search for them, and he began to think that he would find them seated quietly in the parlour in the Rue des Envierges, with the cloth laid and waiting for him. Their silence would be easily explained by some simple mishap. Then he would report himself at the municipal offices, and the happy home life would recommence as of yore.

When he alighted at the Northern Terminus in Paris the station was filled with a boisterous crowd. As soon as the travellers appeared, loud acclamations arose, wild enthusiasm prevailed, hats were waved, and names shouted. Damour felt frightened; he could not understand—he fancied that all these people had assembled to hoot him. But presently he caught the name so noisily cheered; it belonged to a member of the Commune who had been with him in the train; an illustrious exile, who was greeted by the crowd with riotous ovations. Damour saw him pass, looking very much stouter, with moist eyes, smiling, and feeling flattered by his reception. When the hero had got into a cab there was a rush to take out the horses; then the mob swayed, and finally the human billows dashed into the Rue Lafayette, the cab slowly rolling along like a triumphal car above a sea of heads. Damour, hurried, hustled, and crushed, experienced great difficulty in reaching the outer boulevards. Nobody noticed *him*. All his sufferings, Versailles, the voyage, Nouméa, rose up in his throat with a bitter nauseous taste.

When he found himself on the outer boulevards he was strangely affected. He forgot his trials, for it seemed to him that he had just taken back some finished work and was quietly returning to his home in the Rue des Envierges. Ten years of his life, so full of trouble and perplexity, were now closing behind him. And yet he felt a certain wondering strangeness in thus reverting to former habits. Surely the boulevards were wider; and he stopped to read

some new inscriptions, surprised at finding them there. Truth to tell, he did not experience any frank delight in setting foot again on that much-regretted ground; the sensation that came to him was half of tenderness musical with old refrains and half of covert apprehension: the uneasiness that one feels in presence of the unknown, and this although the scene before him was a familiar one. His disquietude increased as he neared the Rue des Envierges; his courage wavered, and he felt half-inclined to go no farther, as if indeed he dreaded some impending catastrophe. Why had he returned? What was he to do?

When he at last found himself in the Rue des Envierges, he halted before the house three times without entering it. The pork-butcher's shop, formerly just opposite, had disappeared, being replaced by a greengrocer's; the woman standing at the door seemed so buxom, and so thoroughly at home, that he did not venture to address her as had been his first intention. He preferred to get it all over, and walk boldly to the house-porter's den. How often he had turned to the left at the end of the passage and knocked at the little window-pane!

'Madame Damour, if you please,' he stammered.

'Don't know her. There's no one of that name in the house.'

He stood transfixed. Instead of the door-keeper of his time, who had been extremely stout, he had before him a cross, dried-up little woman who surveyed him distrustfully.

'Madame Damour,' he resumed; 'lived at the back—ten years ago.'

'Ten years!' screamed the woman. 'Well, plenty of water has passed under the bridges since then. We only came here last January.'

'Maybe Madame Damour has left her address?'

‘No; don’t know her.’ And then, as he insisted, she got angry and threatened to call her husband. ‘Haven’t you soon done prying and spying?’ she said. ‘There are lots of people who sneak in here, anyhow——’

Damour coloured and went away stammering apologies. He was ashamed of his frayed trousers and his soiled old blouse. He went off along the foot pavement with hanging head, but he soon retraced his steps as if he could not make up his mind to depart; it was like taking an eternal farewell that tore his heart. He lifted his eyes, looked at the windows and examined the shops, trying to reconnoitre the surroundings. In those houses, divided into petty lodgings amongst which evictions rain like hail, ten years had sufficed to change nearly all the tenants; and besides, from a vague sense of prudence not unmixed with shame and terror, he did not wish to be recognised. As he went down the street again, he at last came across some people he had known: the tobacconist, a grocer, a laundress, the baker’s wife, with whom he had once dealt. For another fifteen minutes he wavered, passing before the shops, uncertain which to enter, while perspiration came to his forehead from the pain of his inward struggles. With failing heart he finally decided in favour of the baker’s wife, a sleepy kind of woman, who looked as white as if she slept in her own flour-bags. She gazed at him without leaving her counter, and she evidently did not know him, with his tanned skin, his bald head scorched by the burning suns, and his long rough beard covering half his face. Emboldened by her manner, he asked for a halfpenny roll, paid for it, and then ventured to ask:

‘Haven’t you among your customers, madame, a woman and a little girl—Madame Damour?’

The baker’s wife pondered a while, and then in her slumberous way answered, ‘Well, yes; once upon a time,



possibly. But that's very long ago. I don't remember ; so many people come and go.'

He had to rest satisfied with that answer and go off. During the following days he came to the neighbourhood again and questioned other tradespeople with less timidity ; but he always found the same careless indifference, the same oblivion, together with contradictory statements that confused him. All things considered, it seemed positive that Félicie had left the neighbourhood some two years after his own departure for Nouméa, and just about the time of his escape. Nobody knew her address ; some asserted that she had gone to the Gros Caillou, others that she was at Bercy, while, as for little Louise, she was not even remembered. It was a hopeless case. Damour sat down one evening on a bench on the outer boulevard, and wept as he decided to give up his search. What was he to do ? Paris seemed empty now, and the little money that he had brought with him was nearly all spent. Once he thought of returning to Belgium and the coal mine, where it was so dark, and where, remembering nothing, he had lived the vacuous happy life of a dumb brute amidst the slumbering earth. However, he stayed on, miserable and starving, unable to procure work, for he was repulsed everywhere, being judged too old. He was only fifty-five, but the decrepitude brought about by ten long years of suffering made him look five-and-seventy. He prowled about like a wolf, roaming over the building-yards of the monuments fired by the Commune, and now in course of re-erection, begging for such jobs as are usually given to children and cripples. A stone-mason employed at the Hôtel de Ville works at last promised to procure him the keeping of the tools there, but the promise was slow of fulfilment, and Damour was hungry.

One day he stood on the bridge of Notre Dame looking at the water with the dizziness of those unfortunates who



are fascinated by the idea of suicide. But by a mechanical instinct of self-preservation he suddenly loosened his hold of the railings, and threw himself back so violently that he nearly knocked down a passer-by, a tall man in a white blouse, who began to abuse him.

‘ You brute ! ’

But Damour had paused aghast, his eyes riveted on the tall fellow.

‘ Berru ! ’ he stammered at last.

It was indeed Berru—Berru, altered no doubt but to his advantage, for he had a blooming face and looked younger than ever. Damour had frequently thought of him since his return, but then where was he to find the old comrade who had been wont to flit every fortnight ? The painter opened his eyes wide, and even remained incredulous, when Damour in faltering accents revealed his name.

‘ Impossible ! What a cracker ! ’

However, he recognised him at last, and his noisy ejaculations began to attract a crowd around them.

‘ But you were dead ! The deuce, if I expected this ! ’ said he. ‘ It ain’t fair to play such tricks. Come, come, is it quite true that you are alive ? ’

Thereupon Damour, lowering his own voice, begged Berru to be silent. The painter, who thought the whole thing a capital joke, took his arm and led him off to a wine-shop in the Rue St. Martin, plying him with questions and wishing to know all the particulars.

‘ Presently, ’ said Damour, as soon as they were seated at a small table in a private room. ‘ But, first of all, where is my wife ? ’

Berru looked at him in amazement.

‘ What do you mean—your wife ? ’

‘ Yes. Where is she ? Do you know her address ? ’

The painter’s stupefaction increased, and he answered

slowly, 'Certainly—I know her address. But you—don't you know the story?'

'No—what story?'

'Ah, there's a go!' burst out Berru. 'A rum go it is, sure enough! So you know nothing, eh? Why, your wife is married again, old man.'

Damour, who had just lifted his glass to drink, replaced it on the table; he trembled so violently that the wine trickled between his fingers, which he wiped upon his blouse while he repeated in a dull, toneless voice, 'What do you say? married again? married? Are you sure?'

'Positive. You were dead, and she married again; there's nothing strange in that! Only it's deucedly queer, now that you have come to life again!'

Then while the poor fellow sat there, pale and with tremulous lips, the painter spared him no details. Félicie was perfectly happy. She had married a butcher in the Rue des Moines at Batignolles, a widower whose business she managed with a high hand and level head. Sagnard—the husband's name was Sagnard—was a stout, florid man of sixty, extremely well preserved for his age. The shop—a corner one at the angle of the Rue Nollet—was one of the best patronised in the district; it had tall iron railings painted red, and on either side of the signboard there were two large gilded ox-heads.

'And now what do you intend doing?' asked Berru after each explanation.

The poor wretch, dazzled by the description of the fine shop, answered by vaguely wagging his head—he could not tell.

'And Louise?' he asked abruptly.

'The little one? Ah! I don't know! They have probably sent her somewhere to get rid of her, for I have never seen her with them. That's it. Well,

they might anyhow return you the child, as they don't want her. Only, what will you do with a big girl of twenty—for you don't look as if you were in clover, eh? No offence, old man, but anyone passing you in the street would chuck you a copper.'

Damour's head drooped, his throat tightened, and he felt unable to speak a word. Berru ordered a second bottle of wine and began to comfort him.

'The deuce!' he cried. 'As you are alive let us be jolly. It ain't a desperate case—things will mend. What do you propose doing?'

Then the two men plunged into an interminable discussion, in which the same arguments were incessantly repeated. The painter had omitted to mention that immediately after the convict's departure he had attempted to make love to Félicie, and that he harboured a secret grudge against the butcher Sagnard, whom she had preferred to himself, probably because he was well off. After Berru had ordered a third bottle he became excited.

'If I were you,' he said aggressively, 'I'd look them up: square myself in the place and keep Sagnard out if he annoyed me. You are the master; after all the law's on your side.'

By degrees Damour, flushed with wine, felt a glow rise to his white cheeks; he loudly declared that he certainly would do something. Berru kept on urging him to action, slapping his shoulders, and asking him if he were a man! Of course he was a man!—and he had loved that woman so fondly! He loved her still, enough to set Paris on fire in order to get her back. Well, then, in that case, why delay? As she was his, he had only to step out and take her. The two men were nearly drunk by this time, and shouted incoherently in each other's face.

'I'm off,' suddenly said Damour, rising with difficulty to his feet.

‘ Well done ! ’ cried Berru. ‘ Don’t be a coward ! I’ll go with you ! ’

And thereupon they started for Batignolles.

### III

THE shop at the corner of the Rue des Moines and the Rue Nollet had a very prosperous appearance, with its red railings and gilded ox-heads. Quartered animals hung there against white sheets, while legs of mutton, partly wrapped in lace-edged paper like nosegays, formed circular garlands round about. Piles of ruddy flesh, joints already cut and trimmed, roseate veal, purple mutton, and scarlet beef streaked with fat covered the marble slabs. The brass pans, the large scales, the steel hooks, shone brightly. The plentifulness of everything, the healthy atmosphere of the premises, paved with white marble and open to the light, the invigorating smell of the fresh meat—all seemed to send a warmer blood to the cheeks of those employed in the shop.

In the centre, and in full view of the street, Félicie sat enthroned behind a tall counter, partitioned off so as to shield her from the draughts. Behind the glass panes and amid the cheerful reflections of all the pink colouring she herself looked young and fresh, with the full mature freshness of a woman who is past forty. And apart from her clear complexion, her smooth skin, her dark hair, and her white neck, she displayed the amiable busy gravity of a clever business woman, who, with a pen in one hand while with the other she fingers the money in the till, represents a shop’s integrity and prosperity. Under her eyes the men cut and weighed the meat, and called out the amounts ; then the customers passed before the counter ; she received payment, and in a deferential voice talked over the news of



the neighbourhood. A short, sickly-looking woman was at that moment paying for two cutlets, at which she gazed languidly.

‘Fifteen sous, isn’t it?’ said Félicie. ‘So you are not any better, Madame Vernier?’

‘No, not any better. It is always my digestion—my food never agrees with me. The doctor has at last ordered me to eat meat, but it is dreadfully expensive. Ah! you know that the coal dealer is dead?’

‘You don’t say so!’

‘It wasn’t the stomach with him—it was some internal disease, I hear. Two cutlets, fifteen sous! Why, poultry is cheaper!’

‘Well, it is not our fault, Madame Vernier. We hardly know ourselves how to make both ends meet. What is the matter, Charles?’ she added, turning to one of the men.

While Félicie had been chatting and giving change she had not relaxed in her watchfulness, and had just noticed one of the men talking with two fellows on the foot pavement. As he did not seem to have heard her, she raised her voice to call ‘Charles, what is wanted?’

But she did not wait for an answer, for as the two men entered she recognised the one who walked ahead.

‘Ah! so it’s you, Monsieur Berru?’

She did not seem at all pleased, for her lips met with a slightly contemptuous expression. The two men, on their way from the Rue St. Martin to Batignolles, had halted at various wine-shops, for the distance was considerable, and having talked loudly, earnestly, and incessantly, they had frequently felt parched. It was easy to see that the wine had affected them. Moreover, Damour had received a sudden shock when, from across the street, Berru had suddenly stretched out his hand and pointed to Félicie, looking so comely and even young as she sat there at her little counter. ‘There she is!’ said the painter.



It could not be. That must be Louise, who had always resembled her mother. Félicie was much older. And the sight of the flourishing shop, of the ruddy carcasses, of the dazzling brasses, of that well-dressed woman with her air of middle-class prosperity whose hand was rattling piles of money, robbed Damour of both his anger and his courage, and indeed inspired him with terror. That lady would never consent to take him back ; he looked too wretched and abject, with his unkempt beard and filthy blouse. He had already turned on his heels, and was going off in the direction of the Rue des Moines so as to escape notice, when Berru forcibly detained him.

‘ Thunder ! ’ he cried, ‘ haven’t you any blood in your veins ? If I was in your skin I’d make that fine madame wince. I wouldn’t go away unless I had share and share alike—yes, half of the joints, and half of everything else. Go ahead, I say, don’t be so timid ! ’

He then compelled Damour to cross the street ; and asked one of the men if Monsieur Sagnard was in. And having ascertained that the master had gone to the slaughter-houses, he entered the shop, determined to have it over. Damour followed, feeling dazed.

‘ What is it you want, Monsieur Berru ? ’ asked Félicie, coldly and unpleasantly.

‘ I don’t want anything,’ answered the painter, ‘ but my mate does. He has got some news for you.’

Then Berru stepped aside, and Damour faced Félicie, who looked at him. Suffering tortures, cruelly embarrassed, he lowered his eyes. At first she viewed him with disgust, her calm, happy face expressed strong repugnance for that old drunkard who looked like a pauper ; but as she continued gazing at him without a word being spoken on either side, she suddenly turned quite white, stifled a scream, and dropped the money she had been handling, which fell with a silvery ring into the drawer of the till.

‘What is the matter? Are you ill?’ asked Madame Vernier, who had purposely lingered out of curiosity.

Félicie motioned her away with her hand; she could not speak. With a painful effort she rose up, and walked slowly into the parlour at the back of the shop. Without being told to follow, the two men disappeared behind her, Berru chuckling, and Damour with his eyes still fixed on the sawdust strewing the floor, as if he were afraid of stumbling.

‘Well, it’s mighty queer,’ said Madame Vernier, half aloud, when she found herself alone with the assistants.

They had stopped carving and weighing, and looked at each other in astonishment. However, not caring to compromise themselves, they soon resumed their occupations, carelessly indifferent as to the hint of the customer, who went off with her two cutlets in her hand, examining them crossly.

Félicie did not seem to think herself sufficiently alone in the parlour, for she opened a second door and ushered the two men into her bedroom. It was a comfortable, warm, silent apartment, with white curtains to the window and bed; there was a gilt clock, and on the mahogany furniture, shining with polish, not a speck of dust was to be seen. Félicie dropped into a blue rep armchair, repeating mechanically: ‘You—it is you!’

Damour found nothing to say. He glanced round the room, not daring to sit down, because the chairs looked too fine. Once more Berru took the lead.

‘Yes,’ he said, airily. ‘He has been hunting after you for a fortnight past. He met me by chance, and I brought him here.’

And as if he instinctively felt the necessity of apologising to her, he added: ‘You must see that I couldn’t help myself. He’s an old chum, and it made my heart jump to see him with one foot in the gutter.’

Félicie was slowly recovering herself. She was stronger-minded and more practical than Damour. When the choking sensation in her throat relaxed, she nerved herself for an explanation which might put an end to this intolerable situation.

‘Come, Jacques,’ she asked firmly but not unkindly, ‘what do you want with me?’

He did not answer.

‘It is true,’ she continued, ‘I married again, but it was no fault of mine, and you know it. I thought you were dead—you did nothing to undeceive me.’

At last Damour spoke.

‘I did—I wrote to you.’

‘I swear that I did not receive your letter. You know me—you know that I never lie, and I have the certificate of your death—here—in a drawer.’

She went to a desk, opened it feverishly, and pulled out a paper which she handed to Damour, who began to read it with dazed eyes. It was the proof of his death.

Then Félicie resumed: ‘I found myself quite alone. I yielded to the solicitations of a man who offered to raise me out of my misery and loneliness. That is my only crime—I allowed myself to be tempted by the prospect of happiness. It was not a sin, was it?’

He listened with bowed head, more humble and more ill at ease than she was. At length, however, he lifted his eyes.

‘And my daughter?’ he asked.

Félicie started and trembled.

‘Your daughter?’ she stammered. ‘I don’t know—I haven’t got her.’

‘What?’

‘I sent her to my aunt, but she ran away, and—and—went to the bad!’

For an instant Damour remained mute; he looked very

calm, as if he had not understood. Then suddenly losing his embarrassment, he let his closed fist fall on the chest of drawers with such force that a shell box clattered on the marble top. But before he had time to speak, two children, a boy of six and a girl of four, flung the door open and rushed into Félicie's arms with shouts of delight.

'Good evening, little mother; we have been in the gardens, over there, at the end of the street. Françoise said it was time to come home. Oh, if you only knew—there is some sand there—and ducks on the water!'

'Hush! hush! run away now,' said the mother sharply; and calling the servant she added: 'Take them out again, Françoise—it is stupid of you to come in so early.'

The children turned away regretfully, and the girl, displeased by her mistress's manner, pushed them angrily before her. Félicie had been seized with the insane fear that Jacques might kidnap the little ones, fling them across his back and hurry away. Berru, who had not been asked to take a seat, but who had unceremoniously stretched himself in the second arm-chair, now whispered to his friend:

'The little Sagnards. Nothing grows so fast as children, eh?'

When the door had closed again behind the little ones, Damour once more struck the marble with his fist and shouted: 'It's neither here nor there—I want my daughter, and I have come to fetch you.'

Félicie shivered from head to foot.

'Sit down,' she said faintly, 'and let us talk. It won't help you to make a fuss. So you have come for me?'

'Yes—you must come with me, and at once. I am your husband, the only real one. Oh! I know my rights. I say, Berru, is it not my right? Come, put on your bonnet, and don't kick up a row if you don't want everybody to know what's up.'

She looked at him, and unconsciously her anguish-



stricken face plainly expressed that she loved him no longer, that he frightened and horrified her with his hideous, loathsome, old age. Was it possible that she, so fair and clean, accustomed to the comforts of middle-class prosperity, would have to return to the rough, miserable existence of the past with that man who had appeared before her like a ghost?

‘You refuse,’ said Damour, who read her thoughts in her face. ‘Oh! I understand; you have got used to playing the lady behind your counter, and I haven’t a fine shop, and a drawer full of money to finger and rattle at will. Besides, there are the children that were here just now; they seem better looked after than Louise was. When a woman has lost her daughter, she scorns her husband. But I don’t care. I want you to come, and you shall come; or else I’ll go to the police and have you brought away between two gendarmes. It is my right, Berru—is it not?’

The painter nodded approvingly. He enjoyed the scene exceedingly. However, when he saw Damour beside himself, intoxicated with excitement, and Félicie exhausted, half fainting and sobbing, he thought it advisable to assume a conciliatory attitude.

‘Yes, yes,’ he said, in a sententious tone, ‘it is your right, but you must pause awhile and consider. I have always conducted myself with propriety, and I say that before coming to a decision it would only be proper to consult Monsieur Sagnard. As he is not here——’

He stopped, and resumed in a different voice, tremulous with affected emotion: ‘Of course it is hard on my mate to have to wait. Naturally he’s in a hurry. Ah, madame! if you knew what he has gone through! And now he hasn’t a farthing—not a crust—he’s starving—repulsed on all sides. When I met him just now he had not eaten since yesterday.’



Félicie, passing from terror to sudden pity, could not keep back her blinding tears; she was overcome by intense grief, the regret and weariness of life. Involuntarily she exclaimed: 'Forgive me, Jacques!'

Then, when she could command her voice, she continued: 'What is done is done, but I cannot bear to see you so poor. Let me help you.'

Damour made a frantic gesture of refusal.

'Of course,' quickly interposed Berru, 'this house is so plentifully stocked that your wife need not dismiss you with an empty stomach. Admitting that you refuse cash, you can at least accept a present. Supposing you only gave him a bit of gravy beef, eh, Madame Sagnard?'

'Anything he fancies, Monsieur Berru.'

But Damour, still furiously striking the chest of drawers, shouted out: 'Thanks—that's not the sort of grub I live on.'

And walking up close to his wife, he fixed his eyes on hers, saying: 'It is you alone that I want—and I will have you. Keep your meat.'

Félicie had recoiled with renewed fear and loathing. Damour, losing all restraint, became terrible, threatening to smash the whole concern, and vociferating shameful accusations. He would get at his daughter's address, he said; and he shook his wife in her chair, yelling out that she had sold Louise. Félicie, in the awed stupor caused by this outburst, did not attempt to exonerate herself; merely repeating in a broken voice that she did not know the address, but that no doubt it might be discovered. Damour at last took a seat, swearing that the devil himself should not make him leave it; but suddenly he rose, and after a last and still more violent blow on the drawers, he said, hoarsely:

'Well, thunder and hell! I am going. Yes—I go, because I choose to go. But you'll lose nothing for

waiting. I shall come back when your butcher is at home and I will square you all—he, you, the brats, and the shanty! Just wait, and you'll see.'

He went out, still threatening her with his clenched fist, but in his heart he was relieved to end the scene thus.

Berru, who was delighted at being mixed up in this family affair, lingered behind, to say soothingly: 'Don't alarm yourself; I sha'n't leave him. I'll see that he does no mischief.'

He even ventured to kiss Félicie's hand, but she did not seem to notice it. She was so dazed and exhausted that if at that moment Damour had taken her by the arm she would have followed him unresistingly. She listened to the footsteps of the two men crossing the shop; and heard one of her apprentices sharply chopping a joint of mutton while he hurriedly shouted out some amount. Her business instincts brought her back to her counter, and she sat down, very pale but very calm, as though nothing strange had occurred.

'How much is there to take?' she asked.

'Seven francs and a half, madame.'

Then she gave the change.

#### IV

THE next day Damour had a stroke of luck. His acquaintance the stone-mason got him the place of custodian of the building-yard of the Hôtel de Ville, and he was set to watch over the edifice which he had helped to burn down ten years previously. His task was easy, his occupation stupid, benumbing, and yet soothing. At night-time he wandered about at the foot of the scaffoldings, listening for stray noises and sometimes falling asleep on the bags of

plaster. He never spoke of returning to Batignolles till one day when Berru took him off to lunch, and then he declared after the third bottle that the great flare-up should take place on the morrow. However, when the morrow came he never stirred from the yard. And henceforth it was a regular thing : whenever he was in his cups he got excited and asserted his rights, when he was sober he remained thoughtful and half-ashamed. The painter often chaffed him, and sneeringly declared that he wasn't a man ; but he remained gravely indifferent, merely muttering between his teeth : ' That means that I ought to kill them. Well, I'll wait till the fancy takes me.'

One evening he went as far as the Place Moncey, then after spending an hour seated on a bench there he quietly returned to his yard ; that afternoon he had thought he had seen his daughter drive past the Hôtel de Ville, reclining on the cushions of an elegant landau. Berru had offered to make inquiries, declaring that he could procure Louise's address in twenty-four hours, but Damour had refused the proposal. Why should he know ? And yet the supposition that the handsome woman he had seen, beautifully dressed and carried along by two big grey horses, might be his daughter, affected him strangely. His sadness increased, and at last he bought a knife and showed it to Berru, saying that he meant to bleed the butcher with it. This sentence pleased him ; he repeated it frequently, adding with a grim enjoyment of his own facetiousness : ' I'll bleed the butcher. His turn next, eh ? '

Berru, feeling somewhat alarmed, kept him for some hours in a wine-shop of the Rue du Temple trying to convince him that it was needless to bleed anybody. It would, in fact, be idiotic to do so, for at that game a fellow might run his neck into a noose. Then he wrung his friend's hands, trying to obtain a solemn promise that he

would not get himself into trouble ; but Damour repeated with a dogged chuckle : ‘ No, no ; his turn next. I’ll bleed the butcher ! ’

The days passed and the bleeding did not take place. But an incident occurred which seemed likely to hasten the end. Damour was dismissed from the yard for inefficiency ; for one night during a thunder-storm he had fallen asleep and a shovel had been stolen. He now once more dragged himself about the streets, half-starved but still too proud to beg, though he looked with hungry eyes into the windows of the eating-houses. His poverty, instead of exciting him, made him apathetic with respect to his wife ; his shoulders drooped, he walked along meditating. It seemed as if he dared not return to Batignolles now that he no longer had a clean blouse to wear.

At Batignolles Félicie was living in continual terror. She had not dared to mention Damour’s visit to Sagnard when the latter came home ; and on the next day, frightened by her previous silence, she had felt remorseful, but still had lacked the courage to speak. She every moment expected to see her first husband walk into the shop, and in her distress she conjured up appalling scenes. She fancied, too, that the suspicions of the establishment were aroused, for the men grinned together at times, and Madame Vernier, when she called for her two cutlets, assumed a most unpleasant look while waiting for her change.

At last, one evening Félicie flung her arms round Sagnard’s neck, and sobbingly confessed everything. She repeated what she had already said to Damour : it was not her fault, for when people are dead they ought not to come to life again. Sagnard, who was an honest man, hale and hearty, in spite of his sixty years, comforted her. Gracious goodness ! it was certainly no joke, but it would all come right. Most things came right in time. Being securely settled in life with plenty of money for his needs, his



feelings were principally those of curiosity. He would interview the ghost, and reason with him. The affair interested him ; so much so, that a week later, as Damour did not put in an appearance, the butcher said to his wife : ' Well, what's up ? Does he mean to cut us ? If I knew where he lived I'd go and look him up myself.'

Then, as she implored him to remain quiet, he added : ' But, my dear, it's only to ensure your peace and happiness. You are fretting and worrying. Let's have it over.'

Félicie was indeed becoming thin, such disquietude did she feel at the thought of the impending tragedy, the postponement of which only made her the more anxious. However, one day, just as the butcher was blowing up one of his men, who had neglected to change the water of a calf's head, she came up to him, deadly pale, and stammered out : ' There he is !'

' All right,' answered Sagnard, suddenly calming down ; ' take him into the parlour.'

And then, without hurrying himself, he quietly added, turning to his man : ' Wash it thoroughly, mind—in plenty of water, too ; it stinks.'

He then went into the parlour, where he found Damour and Berru. They had met by chance in the Rue de Clichy. Berru had seen less of his old chum lately, having felt bored by his increasing wretchedness. When he discovered that Damour was actually on his way to the Rue des Moines, he became very abusive, declaring that this business was his also. He argued with him, swearing that he would stop his going over yonder to make a fool of himself, and he even stepped in front of him to compel him to give up his knife. However, Damour shrugged his shoulders, obstinately refusing to disclose his intentions, and merely answering again and again, ' Come with me if you like, but don't bother.'



Sagnard did not ask the two men to be seated. As for Félicie, she had fled to her room with her children, and double-locked the door; then she crouched against it, frightened, dazed, and clasping the little ones to her bosom as if to guard and defend them. She listened intently, but could hear nothing as yet. In the parlour the two husbands were looking at each other in awkward silence.

‘So it is you?’ began Sagnard at last, just to say something.

‘Yes, it is,’ answered Damour.

He was thinking how good-looking the butcher was, and he felt very small before him. Sagnard did not appear to be more than fifty; he was handsome and fresh-complexioned; he wore his hair short, his cheeks and chin were clean shaven. Standing there in his shirt-sleeves with a large apron of snowy whiteness tied round him, he had a joyous air of prosperity.

‘However,’ said Damour, hesitatingly, ‘it is not with you that I want to talk; it is with Félicie.’

At these words Sagnard recovered his composure.

‘Come, my friend,’ he said quietly, ‘let us understand each other. Dash it all, we have nothing to reproach ourselves with—you or I. Why should we quarrel when no one is in fault?’

Damour, with his head bent, fixed his eyes doggedly on the legs of the table. At last he muttered drearily: ‘I am not angry with you. Leave me alone; go away. I want to see Félicie.’

‘No, you shall not see her,’ calmly answered the butcher. ‘I don’t choose to have her made ill again, as you made her last time. We can settle this without her. Besides, if you are sensible, everything will be all right. You say you love her still; well, consider her position—think it over, and act for her happiness.’

‘Hold your tongue,’ interrupted Damour, with a sudden

burst of rage. 'Don't interfere, or there will be mischief done.'

Berru, feeling convinced that his friend was about to draw his knife, threw himself in front of him with a great show of zeal. However, Damour pushed him aside.

'Hold your tongue, I say! What are you afraid of, you fool?'

'Be calm,' repeated Sagnard. 'When a man is angry he doesn't know what he's about. Listen to me. If I call in Félicie, will you promise to keep quiet? She is very sensitive, you know that as well as I do. We don't want to kill her between us, do we—neither you nor I? Will you promise to behave decently?'

'Eh! if I had come to misbehave myself, I should have strangled you ere this, and stopped all your fine talk.'

He spoke these words in so deep and pained a tone, that the butcher felt sincerely touched.

'Well, then,' he said, 'I'll call Félicie. By nature I'm very impartial, and I quite understand that you wish to discuss the matter with her. It is your right.'

He then stepped up to the bedroom door and knocked.

'Félicie, Félicie!' he called.

Nothing stirred. Félicie, chilled and affrighted by the prospect of the coming interview, was silently pressing her children still closer to her breast. The butcher, however, repeated impatiently: 'Félicie, do come! You are very silly. He has promised to behave sensibly.'

At last the key turned in the lock, and she appeared, carefully closing the door behind her to ensure the safety of her children. Fresh silence and another awkward pause followed. It was the beginning of the end, as Berru styled it.

Damour began to speak in slow entangled sentences, while Sagnard, who had walked to the window and lifted one of the short blinds, pretended to be looking out, as if

to show that he was both discreet and magnanimous in this affair.

‘Listen, Félicie,’ Damour was saying. ‘You know that I have never been a bad man; you must own that. Well, I don’t mean to begin to-day. True, at first I wanted to smash and murder you all. Then I asked myself how that would better me. I would rather leave you free to choose. We’ll do just what you say. Yes, as the tribunals can’t help us with their justice, you shall decide what you like best. Answer, Félicie; with whom will you go—him or me?’

But she could not answer; she was speechless with emotion.

‘Just so,’ resumed Damour, in the same husky, desolate voice. ‘I understand—you’ll remain with him. When I came here I knew how it would be. Oh, I’m not angry with you—you are right after all. I am done for—I have nothing left, and you love me no longer; whereas *he* makes you happy; and besides there are the two little ones.’

Félicie was weeping uncontrollably.

‘Don’t cry,’ he continued. ‘I am not reproaching you. It has happened so—well, that is all; and I had a sort of wish to see you once more, just to tell you that you might sleep in peace. Now that you have chosen, I won’t torment you again. It’s all over: you’ll never hear of me any more.’

He turned to the door, but Sagnard, who felt deeply moved, stopped him, exclaiming: ‘Dash it, you are a brick, and no mistake! It is out of the question that we should part like this. Stay and dine with us.’

Berru, amazed at this unlooked-for conclusion, which he considered very droll, looked quite shocked when his friend refused the invitation.

‘At least let us drink a glass together,’ insisted the

butcher. 'The deuce, you can't refuse a glass of wine under our roof!'

Damour did not accept at once. His eyes wandered round the parlour, a clear and cheerful room with its light oak furniture; and when at last they rested on Félicie's tear-stained face, and her imploring earnest glance, he said simply: 'Well, I don't mind if I do.'

Sagnard was delighted.

'Glasses, Félicie,' he shouted. 'We can do without the servant. Bring out four glasses, for you must drink with us. Ah! mate, you are a good fellow to have accepted. You don't know what pleasure it gives me! I love a true heart; and yours is a true heart. I'll take my oath on it.'

Félicie was taking the glasses and a bottle of wine out of the sideboard with trembling hands. Her head was swimming; she could do nothing, and Sagnard had to go to her assistance. When the wine was poured out, and they were all seated round the table, they touched glasses.

'Your health.'

Damour, who sat opposite Félicie, had to stretch out his arm to clink glasses with her. They both looked at each other mutely; all their past was in their eyes. She shook so nervously that, as the crystal rang, one could hear the chattering of her teeth as though she were in a high fever. They were now dead to each other, living only in their memories.

'Your health.'

Then, as they drank, the voices of the children in the next room broke upon the silence. The little ones were playing, chasing each other about with shouts and laughter. Suddenly, too, they knocked at the door, calling: 'Mamma! mamma!'

'Enough,' said Damour, setting his glass on the table. 'Good-bye, all of you.'

He went away. Félicie, erect and pale, watched him leave the room, while Sagnard politely escorted both gentlemen through the shop to the street.

## V

As soon as Damour got into the street he began to walk so fast that Berru found it difficult to keep up with him. The painter was indignant. On the Boulevard des Batignolles, when his friend finally sank upon a bench, and remained there, with pallid cheeks, dilated eyes, and weary limbs, the painter at last exploded and relieved his feelings. Good heavens! for his part he would at least have boxed the butcher's ears, and the woman's too. It was revolting to see a man give up his wife to another fellow without any conditions. It was the act of an idiot, a simpleton, not to use any other word. He quoted various examples in support of his opinion. It was a case for an agreement; none in their senses would allow themselves to be duped and swindled in that manner.

'You can't understand,' answered Damour drearily. 'Go away, go, since you are no friend of mine.'

'What! not your friend, after all I have done for you? Look at it squarely—what is to become of you? You haven't a soul to look after you; you are like a lost dog in the streets, and you'll starve if I don't come to the rescue. Not your friend? But if I were to forsake you now, all you could do would be to poke your head under your foot, like a fowl weary of living.'

Damour made a gesture of despair. It was true; he had no alternative but to throw himself into the Seine or give himself up to the police as a destitute vagabond.

'Well,' continued the painter, 'I am so much your friend that I'm going to take you somewhere where you'll get a bed and a bite.'



He rose as if impelled by a sudden resolve, and forced his companion to follow him. Damour, half-persuaded, repeated in a dazed way : ' Where ? where do you mean ? '

' You'll see. As you refuse to dine with your wife, you shall dine elsewhere. Depend upon it, I won't allow you to play the fool twice in one day.'

He walked rapidly down the Rue d'Amsterdam, and when he reached the Rue de Berlin he stopped before a small house, rang the bell, and asked the footman who came to the door if Madame de Sauvigny were at home. On seeing the servant hesitate, he added :

' Go and tell her that Berru is here.'

Damour followed the painter mechanically. This unexpected visit to this sumptuous residence increased his confusion and perplexity. At last he ascended a flight of stairs and abruptly found himself in the arms of a very pretty, fair, diminutive, young woman, clad in a lace gown.

' Papa ! it is papa ! ' she exclaimed joyfully. ' Ah, how kind of you, Berru, to have persuaded him to come at last ! '

She seemed an unsophisticated creature, and did not attach any importance to the old man's grimy blouse ; indeed, she was delighted, and clapped her hands in a sudden fit of filial love. Her father, who was greatly startled, had not even recognised her.

' Yes, yes, it's Louise ! ' said Berru.

Then Damour stammered vaguely, ' Ah yes ! you are too kind ! '

He did not attempt to be familiar. Louise, however, made him sit down on a sofa, and rang the bell to give orders that she was at home to nobody. Then Damour glanced about the room, which was hung with Indian fabrics, and felt strangely moved. Berru, meanwhile, triumphantly slapped him on the shoulder, saying, ' Will

you dare to say again that I'm not your friend? I knew that you'd want your daughter some time or other; so I got hold of her address, and came to tell her all about you. She at once exclaimed, "Bring him to me!"'

'Why, certainly I did, poor dear father!' added Louise. 'Oh, you know, I abhor your Republic! The Communists are a dirty lot, who would ruin us all if they had the chance. But you are my papa. I remember how good you were to me when I was quite little, and so ill. You'll see how comfortably we'll get on together, provided we never talk politics. To begin with, we'll all three of us dine together. Won't it be jolly?'

Her clear eyes were full of laughter, and her pale hair flew round her ears. Damour remained nerveless; he wanted to refuse because he did not think it quite right to accept a meal there; but he had already lost the energy which had hurried him away from the butcher's without once turning his head. His daughter was too soft and gentle, and her little white hands placed on his own held him so fast.

'Now, do say yes,' she pleaded.

'Yes,' he said at last, while two big tears coursed down the furrows with which misery had marked his cheeks.

Berru thought this decision very practical. As the three of them were passing into the dining-room, a footman came to tell his mistress that 'Monsieur' was there.

'I can't see him,' she said quietly: 'tell him that I am with my father.'

The dinner was delightful. Berru enlivened it by relating all sorts of stories, and Louise laughed till the tears ran down her cheeks. She fancied herself back in the Rue des Envierges, and enjoyed herself exceedingly. Damour ate heartily and grew heavy with fatigue and food; but each time his eyes met his daughter's his smile became very soft. At dessert they drank some sweet foaming wine

like champagne, which affected them all. As soon as the servants had retired they rested their elbows on the table and began to speak of the past with half-maudlin melancholy. Berru had rolled a cigarette for Louise, who smoked it slowly with partly closed eyes and humid lashes while judging her mother's conduct with great severity.

'You understand,' she said to her father, 'I do not see her any more—her conduct has been too outrageous. Still, if you like I will go and tell her what I think of the dirty trick she played upon you——'

However, Damour gravely declared that Félicie no longer existed for him.

Then Louise rose, exclaiming, 'Wait a bit ; I must show you something that will give you pleasure !'

She left the room, but presently returned with her cigarette still between her teeth, and handed her father an old yellow photograph broken at the edges. The workman started violently, and, fixing his dim eyes upon the portrait, stammered, 'Eugène, my poor Eugène !'

He passed the photograph to Berru, who looked at it with emotion and murmured feelingly : 'It is very like him.'

Then it was Louise's turn. She kept the portrait for a moment in her hand, and then returned it to her father, saying in a tearful voice : 'Oh, I remember him well—he was so kind !'

Overcome by their feelings, they all three began to cry. Twice the photograph went round the table, eliciting pathetic comments. It had become very pale from exposure ; poor Eugène in his uniform of the National Guard looked like a phantom rebel. At last, having turned the card round, the father suddenly read what he had written long ago upon the back, 'I will avenge you !' and thereupon, brandishing a dessert-knife over his head, he repeated his oath : 'Yes—yes ! I will avenge you !'

Then Damour propped the portrait against his glass,

and again gazed at it. By degrees, however, they all became quieter and more practical. Louise, who was easy-going and open-handed, wanted to help her father, and at last she had an inspiration; she asked him if he would consent to look after a small estate which had been bought for her near Mantes in Normandy. There was a small house on the property where he could live very comfortably on two hundred francs a month.

‘Come now, that will be a perfect paradise!’ shouted Berru, who accepted for his friend. ‘And if he feels dull there, I’ll go and cheer him up.’

The following week Damour was settled at Bel Air, his daughter’s property; and it is there that he now lives in blissful repose, such as Providence owed him after all his vicissitudes. He is growing stout and florid; he dresses like a well-to-do citizen, and has the honest good-natured face of an old soldier. The peasants salute him respectfully. He shoots and angles; he is often seen sunning himself in the lanes, or watching the growth of the corn with the tranquil conscience of a man who has cheated nobody, but lives on an income laboriously earned. Whenever his daughter visits Bel Air with her friends, he maintains a dignified reserve; his happiest moments are when she runs down alone to see him and they lunch together in the little house. Then he talks to her with the fond foolish prattle of a doting nurse, he looks at her pretty dresses with admiration, and prepares with his own hands various wonderful and delicate dishes, while Louise brings sweets and cakes for dessert in her pockets.

Damour has never tried to see his wife again. His daughter is everything to him; she took pity on him, and she is his only joy. He has obstinately refused to attempt to recover his civil rights. What good would it do to confuse the Government registers? His peace and security are all the more assured since he is unknown. He lives in



his nook, lost and forgotten. Being nobody, he accepts the bounty on which he lives without a blush; whereas if he were to resuscitate legally, ill-natured and envious people might comment unfavourably on his position, and he would possibly wince under their blame.

There are times, however, when the little house becomes boisterous. This is when Berru spends four or five days in the country with his old pal. He has, at last, found under Damour's roof a pleasant corner where he can eat his fill and enjoy himself. He shoots and fishes, or else during whole afternoons he lies on his back near the river. At night the two friends talk politics. Berru brings Anarchist papers from Paris, and after reading them they both agree upon the radical measures which are imperatively required, such as shooting the Government, burning Paris again, and rebuilding another city, the real metropolis of the people. They invariably select general extermination as the basis of universal happiness. Finally, when it is time to go to bed, Damour, who has had Eugène's photograph framed, walks up to it, gazes on the faded likeness, and, brandishing his pipe, exclaims: 'Yes—yes, I will avenge you.'

And the next morning, with bent shoulders and placid face, he returns to his fishing; while Berru, stretched out at full length, sleeps buried in the grass.



# THE INUNDATION

## I

My name is Louis Roubieu. I am seventy years of age, and was born in the village of St. Jory, at a few leagues from Toulouse, on the banks of the Garonne. During fourteen years I battled with the soil in order to obtain from it enough bread to feed me. Affluence came at last, and, only a month ago, I was the richest farmer of the whole country-side.

Our home was blessed. Happiness had its abode under our roof. The sun was our ally, and I do not remember a bad harvest. We were nearly a dozen at the farm, all sharing the same happiness : myself still hale and hearty, teaching the young ones how to work ; my younger brother, Pierre, a bachelor, and formerly a sergeant in the army ; my sister, Agathe, a shrewd housewife, extremely stout and gay, who had come to live with us after her husband's death, and whose laughter rang out from one end of the village to the other. Next came a whole brood : my son Jacques, and Rose, his wife ; with their three daughters, Aimée, Véronique, and Marie. The first was married to Cyprien Bouisson, a strapping young fellow, to whom she had given two babies, one two years and the other ten months old ; Véronique, on her side, had just become

engaged to Gaspard Rabuteau ; while Marie, white and very fair, looked more like a town-born lady than a farmer's daughter. This made up ten ; I was both a grandfather and a great-grandfather.

When we assembled round the supper-table I used to place my sister Agathe on my right, my brother Pierre on my left, and the children completed the circle, seated by order of seniority, down to the mite but ten months old. The whole lot ate heartily, and how gay they all were between each mouthful ! I felt both pride and pleasure glowing in my veins when the little ones, stretching out their hands to me, shouted :

‘ Grandfather, give us some more bread. A big piece, grandfather, please ! ’

Those were glorious days. The busy house sang through all its windows ; in the evenings Pierre invented new games or told old stories of his regiment ; on Sundays Aunt Agathe baked cakes for the girls, and Marie knew some beautiful hymns which she sang with the voice of a young chorister, looking like a saint too, with her fair hair falling low on her neck, and her hands folded in her lap. At the time of Aimée's marriage with Cyprien I had added a storey to the house, and I used to say jokingly that when Véronique married Gaspard I should have to add another, and that if I did so at each successive wedding the house would end by reaching the sky. None of us wanted to leave it ; we would rather have erected a town in the enclosure behind the farm. When the members of a large family agree, it is good to live and die on the spot where one was born.

This last spring, the month of May was superb ; the crops had not looked so promising for years. That day I went the round of the land with my son Jacques. We started at about three o'clock. Our meadows, still of a tender green, stretched alongside the Garonne ; the grass

had nearly reached its full height, and in a willow copse planted only last year there were shoots a yard long. We passed on, examining our corn-fields and vineyards, the land bought bit by bit as our means increased. The wheat was growing apace, the vines were in full bloom, heralding a rich vintage. Jacques laughed his hearty laugh, and, slapping me on the shoulder, said: 'Well, father, we sha'n't lack bread or wine. You must be in the good graces of God Almighty, as He lets money rain upon your land like this.'

Jacques was right. I had no doubt gained the good graces of some saint in heaven, for all the good luck of the district appeared to fall on us. During a storm the hail would stop at the edge of our fields; if our neighbours' vines were ailing, a protecting wall seemed to rise around ours, and gradually I had come to deem this just. Harming no one, I believed happiness to be my due.

On our way home we crossed some land belonging to us on the opposite side of the village. A plantation of mulberry trees was coming on splendidly, and the almond trees in a grove were bearing all they could. We chatted gaily and made plans for the future. As soon as we had saved the necessary capital we would purchase certain patches of ground lying between our various lots, and thus become the owners of an entire corner of the parish. If the crops turned out as well as they promised, our dream could be realised in the autumn.

As we drew near the farm we saw Rose gesticulating and shouting: 'Come on, hurry up!'

One of our cows had just calved, and the whole household was astir. Aunt Agathe went rolling about, while the girls watched the little calf, whose advent seemed like an additional benison. Quite recently we had been compelled to enlarge our sheds, which contained nearly a hundred head of cattle, without reckoning the horses.

‘Another lucky day,’ I said. ‘We must have a bottle of good wine to-night.’

Just then Rose took us aside to inform us that as Gaspard, Véronique’s lover, had come to fix the wedding-day, she had kept him to dinner. Gaspard, the eldest son of a farmer of Moranges, was a young man of twenty, known all through our part for his prodigious strength. At a public *fête* at Toulouse he had wrestled with and defeated Martial, the Lion of the South. Withal he was extremely good-natured and tender-hearted, and so shy, indeed, that he blushed whenever Véronique’s calm eyes met his own.

I told Rose to call him. He had stayed in the yard helping the maids to hang out the linen of a three months’ washing. When he entered the parlour where we were all assembled, Jacques turned to me saying, ‘It’s for you to speak, father.’

‘Well, my boy, you have come to settle the day,’ I said.

‘Yes, that’s why I came,’ he answered with a deep colour on his cheeks.

‘Don’t blush, my lad,’ I resumed. ‘Shall we say the 10th of July, the day of Sainte Félicité? To-day’s the 28th of June, so you won’t have long to wait. My poor dead wife’s name was Félicité—it will be a good omen. Well, is it a settled thing?’

‘Yes, all right; the day of Sainte Félicité will do,’ replied Gaspard.

Then as he came up to Jacques and me his hand fell on our outstretched palms with a might sufficient to fell an ox. Next he kissed Rose, calling her ‘mother.’ This stalwart young fellow with such redoubtable fists was losing sleep and flesh for love of Véronique; he told us that he should have fallen ill if we had not consented to let him have her.

‘Now,’ I resumed, ‘let us go to our meal. All of you to your places. Thunder and lightning! I am as hungry as a wolf!’

That evening we sat down eleven. We had placed Gaspard and Véronique side by side, and he kept gazing at her, forgetting his supper, and so disturbed by the thought that she was his that big tears moistened his eyelashes. Cyprien and Aimée, who had been married three years, smiled as they watched them; Jacques and Rose, with their twenty-five years of wedlock, were graver; still they stealthily exchanged moist glances, born of a long-abiding tenderness. As for myself, I felt as if I were growing young again, and living anew in those lovers, whose happiness seemed to bring a nook of paradise to our board. How excellent the soup tasted that evening! Aunt Agathe, who was always one for laughing, ventured to make a few jocose remarks, whereupon Pierre insisted upon relating his love passages with a lady of Lyons. Fortunately we had got to the dessert and were all talking at the same time. I had brought two bottles of sweet wine from the cellar, and we drank to Gaspard and Véronique’s good luck, as the fashion is with us. Luck is never to quarrel, to have heaps of children, and put by bags of money. Later on we had some singing; Gaspard knew some love ballads in our dialect, and by way of conclusion we asked Marie for a hymn. She stood up and began at once, her flute-like and delicate voice falling like a caress on the ear.

I had moved towards the window, and as Gaspard joined me I said, ‘There is nothing new over your way, is there?’

‘No,’ he answered; ‘they talk a good deal about the heavy rains of the last few days; some say they might turn out badly.’

It had, indeed, recently been raining during sixty consecutive hours, and since the previous day the Garonne



had been greatly swollen ; still we trusted her, and as long as she did not overflow we could not think of her as a dangerous neighbour. She was so useful, her expanse of water was so broad and gentle ; and, moreover, peasants do not readily quit their homes even if the roof be about to fall.

‘Nonsense,’ I said ; ‘nothing will happen ; it’s the same every year. The river puts up its back as if it were in a rage, then it quiets down in a single night, and subsides as gently as a lamb. Take my word, lad, it’s only a joke. Just look out of the window, and see what splendid weather we are having !’

Then with my hand I pointed to the sky.

It was seven o’clock ; the sun was setting. All was blue ; the sky showed like an immense expanse of azure, through which the sunset swam like golden dust. From above there slowly descended a delight, reaching to the verge of the distant horizon. I had never seen the village in such tender restfulness. A pink glow was fading under the eaves. I could hear a neighbour laughing and children chattering at the bend of the road opposite our house ; while from further off the lowing of herds returning to their sheds reached us, softened by the distance.

Meanwhile, the deep roar of the Garonne sounded incessantly ; but I was so used to the voice of the river that it seemed to be merely the voice of silence. By degrees the sky whitened, and the village seemed falling into a serener sleep. It was the end of a beautiful day, and I fancied that all our happiness, our rich harvests, Véronique’s engagement, came to us wafted from above, in the purity of the dying light. A benediction spread over us with the farewell of day.

I had returned to the centre of the room where the girls were chatting merrily, and we were listening to them with smiling lips, when suddenly, through the great peace

of the twilight, an appalling shriek rang out—a shriek of terror and of death :

‘The Garonne ! the Garonne !’

## II

WE ran to the yard.

St. Jory lies at the very bottom of a dip in the land, lower than the river, and some five hundred yards away from it. A screen of poplars dividing some meadows shuts out all view of the water.

We could see nothing, but the shriek still resounded : ‘The Garonne ! the Garonne !’

Then, coming from the road in front of us, two men and three women abruptly appeared, one of the latter holding a child in her arms. They were shouting, frenzied with terror, and running as fast as they could over the hard ground. Every now and then they looked back with scared faces, as if they were being pursued by a pack of wolves.

‘What has happened ?’ asked Cyprien. ‘Can you make out anything, grandfather ?’

‘No,’ I answered ; ‘the leaves are not even stirring.’

The low line of the horizon lay still and peaceful, but before I had done speaking a sharp exclamation broke from the others. Behind the fugitives, between the trunks of the poplars, over the tall grass, we caught sight of something resembling a pack of grey, yellowish spotted animals racing onwards. They appeared on all sides—waves hurrying upon waves, an invasion of masses of water crested with foam, shaking white saliva, and making the ground quiver with the heavy gallop of their serried ranks.

Then we also echoed the despairing cry, ‘The Garonne ! the Garonne !’

The two men and the three women were still flying along the road, and they could hear the hideous gallop gaining upon them. Presently the waves formed in a single line, rolling and crashing with the thunder of charging battalions. Under their first onset three poplars snapped ; their tall foliage tottered and disappeared. Then a shed was swallowed up ; a wall burst ; unharnessed carts were carried away like wisps of straw. But the water seemed specially to pursue the fugitives. At a bend of the road, which is very steep at that particular spot, the flood suddenly fell in immense volume, cutting off their retreat. We saw them still attempting to run, splashing in the water, but silent now and maddened with fear. The waves rose to their knees ; at last a huge billow dashed upon the woman who was carrying the child. Then all were submerged.

‘Quick, quick!’ I cried. ‘Come in! the house is strong. We have nothing to fear.’

However, out of prudence, we at once ascended to the first floor, making the girls pass before us ; I was determined to be the last. Our house was built on a bank above the road, and the water was now slowly invading the yard with a soft little ripple. We were not much alarmed.

‘Never mind,’ said Jacques reassuringly ; ‘there is no danger. Do you remember, father, how, in ’55, the water came into the yard just as it does now? It rose to a foot, and then receded.’

‘It’s a pity for the crops, anyhow,’ muttered Cyprien, half aloud.

‘No, no ; it won’t be much,’ I said, noting the dilated, questioning eyes of the women. Aimée had laid her children on her bed and sat close to them with Véronique and Marie. Aunt Agathe talked of warming some wine which she had brought with her, in order to

cheer us. Jacques and Rose looked out of one window and I stood at the other with my brother Cyprien and Gaspard.

‘Come up, can’t you?’ I called to the two maids who were paddling about in the yard. ‘Don’t stop there and get your legs wet.’

‘But the poor beasts,’ they answered; ‘they are frightened and will get killed in the sheds.’

‘Never mind! Come up. We will look after the cattle presently.’

If the water continued to rise it would be impossible to save the cattle, but I thought it best not to alarm the servants. I tried to appear quite at ease, and leaning over the window-sill I gave an account of the progress of the flood. After rushing to the assault of the village, the river had taken possession of even its narrowest lanes. The race of the charging waves had ceased; there was now a stealthy invincible invasion. The hollow in which St. Jory lies was being transformed into a lake. In our yard the water had risen to a height of three feet already: I watched its ascent, but I affirmed that it remained stationary, and once I even hinted that it was subsiding.

‘You will have to sleep here to-night, my boy,’ I said, turning to Gaspard, ‘that is, unless the roads get clear in a few hours, which might easily be the case.’

He looked at me; his face was very pale, and I saw his eyes turn to Véronique, gleaming the while with intolerable anguish.

It was now half-past eight. Out of doors it was still light—a white glimmer, unspeakably mournful, dropping from the pale sky. Before the maids joined us they had thought of bringing two lamps. I had them lit, hoping that they would brighten the darkening room in which we had taken refuge. Aunt Agathe now pushed a table forward and suggested a game of cards. The excellent



woman, whose eyes sought mine anxiously every now and then, was especially desirous of diverting the children : her cheerfulness was grandly brave, and she laughed to conjure away the terror which she felt was creeping over all the others. The game was arranged ; Aunt Agathe forced Aimée, Véronique, and Marie into their chairs, placed the cards in their resistless fingers, and began shuffling, dealing, and cutting with such a flow of words that she almost stifled the sound of the rising flood. But our daughters could not fix their minds on the game ; they remained pale, with feverish hands, bending their heads to listen. Every now and then one or another of them would turn uneasily and whisper :

‘ Grandfather, is it still rising ? ’

It *was* rising with fearful rapidity, but I answered carelessly, ‘ No, no ; go on playing—there is no danger.’

Never before had I felt my heart wrung by such cruel dread. All the men had grouped themselves in front of the windows to shut out the appalling scene ; we tried to look unconcerned when our faces were turned to the room, facing the lamps whose circular light fell on the table as amidst the gentle peace of homely vigils. I remembered winter evenings when we had sat thus at that table. It was the same quiet picture, full of the soft warmth of affection. But while perfect peace dwelt within, I could hear behind my back the bellowing of the overflowing river, which was ever rising and rushing onward.

‘ Louis,’ whispered my brother Pierre, ‘ the water is only three feet from the window ; something must be done.’

I pressed his arm to silence him, but it was too late to conceal our peril. The cattle had become frantic in the outhouses : we plainly heard the bleating and lowing of the maddened animals, and particularly the wild shrieks of the horses who felt themselves in danger.



‘O my God! my God!’ murmured Aimée, who stood up, convulsed by a long shudder, and with her closed fists pressed to her temples.

The women had all risen, and we were powerless to keep them from the windows; they stood there erect and mute, their hair lifted by a wind of terror. The twilight had come; a treacherous gleam hovered above the watery sheet, the pale sky looked like a white pall thrown over the earth; afar off some smoke was trailing; then everything became blurred: it was the close of a day of horror, sinking into a night of death. And not a human sound—only the dull roar of the infinitely widening expanse of water, and the lowing and neighing of the frenzied animals!

‘O God! O God!’ repeated the women under their breath, as if afraid to speak aloud.

A loud crash silenced them. The infuriated cattle had broken through the stable doors: they passed by in the yellow flood, rolling as they were carried away by the current; the sheep were hurled along in droves like dead leaves whirling in pools; the cows and the horses struggled, trying to feel the ground but losing their footing; our big grey horse refused to die: he reared, stretched out his long neck and panted like the bellows of a forge, till the eager waters dashed on his hindquarters, and then we saw him yield himself up and disappear.

Then for the first time we screamed; our cries seemed to come unconsciously, propelled by some alien will. With hands outstretched towards all those dear animals hurried away for ever, we moaned and wept, sobbing aloud, giving vent to the tears and lamentations we had restrained. It was indeed our ruin! the crops lost, the cattle drowned, our fortune gone in a few brief hours! Oh, God was not just! We had not offended Him, and yet He had taken back all He had given! I shook my fist at Heaven! I recalled our afternoon walk, the meadows, the wheat-fields, the

vineyards, all so promising! They had all lied! Happiness had lied! The very sun, when he had set so gently and calmly in the deep serenity of evening, had lied.

The flood was still rising, and all at once my brother Pierre, who had been watching it, exclaimed sharply: 'Louis, look out! The water has reached the windows. We can't stay here.'

These words broke upon our despair. I pulled myself together, and shrugging my shoulders said, 'After all, money is nothing. As long as we are all together and safe, there is nothing to regret. We must begin work afresh, that is all.'

'Yes, yes—you are right, father,' returned Jacques feverishly, 'and we *are* safe—the walls are solid. Let us get upon the roof.'

It was our only refuge. The water, after mounting the staircase step by step with a persevering gurgle, was entering at the door. We repaired to the loft, keeping close together, with the vague instinct which makes people in peril anxious to remain side by side. Cyprien alone had vanished. I called to him and he came out of an adjoining room with a white scared face. Then as I suddenly became aware of the absence of the two maids, and stopped to wait for them, he looked at me strangely and whispered:

'Dead—the outbuilding where their room was has just given way.'

The poor creatures must have gone to get their savings out of their boxes. Cyprien, in the same tone, told me that they had managed to throw a ladder across to the building where they slept, and had used it as a bridge. I warned him to say nothing, but I felt a great chill at the back of my neck. It was the breath of death entering our house.

We did not even think of turning out the lamps, when

we went up to the roof in our turn; the cards remained spread out on the table; there was a foot of water in the room.

### III

FORTUNATELY the roof was broad and the incline a gentle one. It was reached by a skylight opening on to a little platform, upon which our party took refuge. The women sat down, and presently the men stepped out on the tiles to reconnoitre, going as far as the two tall chimney-stacks at either end of the roof. I remained leaning against the aperture of the skylight, looking towards the four points of the horizon.

‘Help cannot fail to come soon,’ I said, with forced hopefulness. ‘The folks of Saintin have some boats, and they will pass this way. See! over there, isn’t that a lantern on the water?’

I received no answer. Pierre had mechanically lighted his pipe, and was smoking so furiously that with every puff he spat out bits of the stem which he had broken between his teeth. Jacques and Cyprien stared into the distance with mournful faces, while Gaspard, with clenched fists, went on pacing the roof as if seeking for some outlet. The women, crouching and shuddering at our feet, covered their eyes to avoid the terrible sight. Presently, however, Rose, raising her head, looked round her.

‘Where are the servants?’ she asked. ‘Why don’t they come up?’

I pretended not to hear, but she turned to me and fixed her eyes on mine.

‘Where are the girls?’ she repeated.

I turned away. I could not lie to her, and I felt that the deadly chill which had already touched me was passing

over our wives and daughters. They had understood. Marie rose to her full height ; a deep sigh parted her lips ; and then sinking down she burst into a passion of tears. Aimée kept the heads of her two children in her lap, covering them up with her skirts as if to shield them. Véronique, who had her face in her hands, remained motionless. Aunt Agathe, growing paler, was repeatedly making the sign of the Cross and muttering *Paters* and *Aves*.

All around us the scene was one of supreme grandeur. The night, which had now completely fallen, had the clear limpidity of summer darkness. There was no moon as yet, but the sky was studded with countless stars, and it was of so pure a blue that all the surrounding space was filled with an azure light. The horizon was so clearly defined that it seemed to harbour the twilight ; and meanwhile the immense sheet of water, spreading out under the soft skies, became quite white, luminous as with a glow of its own, a phosphorescence which tipped the crest of every wave with tiny flamelets. Land was nowhere visible, the whole plain must have been submerged. One evening, on the coast near Marseilles, I had seen the sea looking like this, and had remained gazing at it transfixed with admiration.

‘ The water rises, the water rises,’ repeated my brother Pierre, still biting the stem of his pipe, which he had allowed to go out.

Indeed, the water was now only a yard from the edge of the roof. It was losing its tranquillity, its lake-like quietude, and currents were forming. When it reached a certain height we were no longer sheltered by the rising ground before the village ; and as soon as this was covered, in less than an hour’s time, the flood became threatening, lashing the houses with all the wreckage, staved-in barrels, timbers, and trusses of hay, which it carried on its bosom,



In the distance we heard the deafening shocks of the onsets against the walls. Poplars snapped and fell with a sinister splash, and houses crashed down like cartfuls of stones turned over on the roadside.

Jacques, unnerved by the women's sobs, kept on repeating: 'We cannot stop here. Something must be done. Father, I implore you, let us try something.'

Hesitating and stammering, I repeated after him: 'Yes, yes, let us try something.'

And none of us knew what to try. Gaspard proposed that he should take Véronique on his back, and swim away with her. Pierre suggested a raft. They were both crazy. At last, however, Cyprien said: 'If we could only reach the church.'

And indeed high above the flood the church still rose up intact with its little square tower. We were separated from it by seven dwellings. Our house, the first of the village, adjoined a taller building, which in its turn leant against its neighbour. It might be feasible to reach the presbytery by the roofs, and thence it would be easy to get into the church. Many of the villagers had already sought that refuge probably, for the neighbouring roofs were deserted, and we heard a murmur of voices which certainly came from the belfry. But at best it was a perilous and uncertain undertaking.

'It is impossible,' said Pierre. 'Raimbeau's house is too lofty; we should need some ladders.'

'At any rate, I'll go and see,' said Cyprien. 'If we cannot get across I'll return; if we can we must all go, the men carrying the women.'

I let him start. He was right: situated as we were, everything must be attempted. With the help of an iron clamp fixed to a chimney-stack he had just succeeded in climbing on to the next house when his wife, Aimée, raised her eyes, and saw that he was gone.



‘Where is he?’ she said. ‘I will not let him leave me. We are one—we must die together.’

Then as she caught sight of him on the other roof she darted across the tiles, still carrying her children.

‘Wait for me, Cyprien,’ she panted; ‘I am coming with you. I will die with you.’

She would not be denied. Her husband, leaning over, implored her to remain with us, promising to return, and assuring her that he was only acting for our common rescue. But, shaking her head, and with a wild look in her eyes, she still repeated excitedly: ‘I am coming with you. I will die with you.’

He yielded: first he took the children, and then he helped his wife to climb up to him. We could see them walking slowly on the apex of the roof. Aimée had again taken her weeping children in her arms, and at every step Cyprien turned and supported her.

‘As soon as she is in safety,’ I shouted, ‘come back to us.’

I saw him wave his hand, but the roar of the water did not allow me to hear his answer. They were soon out of sight; they had descended on to the house beyond, the roof of which was lower. Five minutes later they again appeared to view on the third roof, which must have been very steep, for we could see that they were crawling up it on their knees. A sudden dread possessed me, and raising my hands to my mouth I shouted out with all my strength: ‘Come back, come back!’

All of us, Pierre, Jacques, and Gaspard, called to them to return; our voices seemed to stay them for a moment, but they soon moved on. They had reached the corner where the street turned in front of Raimbeau’s house, a tall building rising nearly nine feet above all the neighbouring roofs. For a moment they wavered, and then Cyprien began to climb up a chimney with catlike agility.

Aimée, who had evidently consented to wait for him, remained erect amid the tiles. We could plainly distinguish her clasping her babies to her bosom, standing out black against the clear sky, and looking much taller than she really was. It was then that the awful catastrophe began.

Rambeau's house, originally intended for some business purposes, was very flimsily built, and, moreover, its frontage received the full shock of the current in the street. I fancied I could see it tremble under the onset of flood, and with bated breath I watched Cyprien's progress along the roof. Suddenly we heard a deep growl. The round moon had risen, freely pacing the sky, her yellow disc lighting up the immense lake with the clear brightness of a lamp. Not a single detail was lost to us. That growl was the noise of Rambeau's house falling in. A scream of terror escaped us as we saw Cyprien sink down. In that tempestuous crash we could only see the splashing of the waves under the remnants of the roof. Then all was calm again, the lake became level once more, with the black carcass of the submerged house bristling above the water with its snapped floors—a confused mass of tangled timbers, looking like the framework of some half-destroyed cathedral. Between those timbers I thought I could see a body moving, a living form wrestling with superhuman efforts.

'He lives!' I cried. 'Ah, blessed be God, he lives! There, above that white sheet of water lit up by the moon!'

We shook with hysterical laughter and clapped our hands for joy, as if all danger had passed away.

'He will get up again,' said Pierre.

'Yes, yes,' explained Gaspard. 'See, he is trying to catch hold of the beam on his left.'

But our laughter was suddenly hushed. We remained

dumb, silenced by anxiety. We had just realised in what an awful position Cyprien now found himself. In the fall of the house his feet had been caught between two beams, and he was hanging head downwards at a few inches above the water, and quite unable to free himself. His agony was horrible. On the roof of the other house stood Aimée with her two children, shaken by convulsive shudders. There she remained, a witness of her husband's death-struggle, never once taking her eyes off him. From her rigid lips there came a continuous lugubrious sound, like the howl of a dog frenzied by terror.

'We cannot let him die like that,' said Jacques in distraction. 'We must go to him.'

'One might crawl down the beams, perhaps,' muttered Pierre, 'and disengage him.'

They were already moving towards the nearest roof when the house it covered suddenly shook and crumbled in its turn. The way was cut off. Our blood froze in our veins. We seized each other's hands and pressed them nervously, unable to turn our eyes away from the ghastly sight.

Cyprien had at first attempted to stiffen himself, and with extraordinary muscular strength he had finally succeeded in getting further away from the water and maintaining a sidelong position. But fatigue was mastering him: he tried to resist, to lay hold of the beams, beating the air with his arms in the hope of finding something to which he might cling; then accepting death, he fell back and again hung down quite motionless. Death was slow to come; his hair barely touched the water, which was patiently rising—he must have felt its coolness on his head. A first wave wetted his brow, another closed his eyes—slowly his head vanished from our view.

The women, huddled at our feet, hid their faces with their clasped hands. We fell on our knees with out-

stretched arms, stammering supplications and crying bitterly. On the other roof Aimée, still erect, with her children close pressed to her bosom, shrieked still louder and louder amid the night.

## IV

I CANNOT tell how long the stupor of that crisis lasted. When I recovered my senses the water was higher still ; it now reached the tiles, and our roof was only a narrow island barely emerging from the immense watery expanse. On the right and left the houses had fallen. The sea was widening on all sides.

‘ We are moving,’ whispered Rose, as she clutched at the tiles.

And, indeed, we all felt a pitching motion, as if the roof had changed into a floating raft ; the heavy swell seemed to carry us along. It was only by turning to the motionless church tower that we got rid of this delusion, and realised that we were on the same spot amid the angry surf.

It was then that the siege began in earnest. The current so far had followed the street, but the increasing wreckage that barred the way now caused it to flow back. A furious onset commenced. As soon as a plank or beam passed within the current’s grasp it was seized, swung round, and hurled like a ram against our house ; the water never loosened its grasp ; the current sucked the wreckage back merely to launch it again at our walls, which it assailed with regularly repeated blows. Sometimes ten or twelve large pieces of wood would attack us at once on all sides. The water hissed, foamy splashes wetted our feet. We heard the dull moan of the sonorous house filling with water, and the creaking of the broken partitions ; and



whenever a more savage assault made the whole building quiver, we fancied that it was all over—that the walls were opening and giving us up to the river through their yawning breaches.

Gaspard, who had ventured to the very edge of the roof, succeeded in catching a passing beam, which he dragged out of the water with his powerful athletic arms.

‘We must defend ourselves,’ he shouted.

Then Jacques, with the assistance of Pierre, endeavoured to stop a long pole. I cursed my old age, which left me useless and as weak as a child. However, the defence was being organised ; it was the fight of three men against the flood. Gaspard, armed with his beam, waited for the passing timbers which the current turned into battering rams, and kept them off at some little distance from the walls. The shock at times was so great that he fell down. Meantime Pierre and Jacques were manœuvring with their long pole, shoving away the nearer wreckage.

This fierce and senseless battle lasted during nearly an hour. As the time passed the combatants grew wildly excited : they beat the water, insulted it, and swore at it. Gaspard hacked at it as if in a bodily struggle, lunged out with his beam as if he were trying to pierce a human breast. And all this time the water remained quietly obstinate, without a wound—invincible. Jacques and Pierre at last sank down on the roof exhausted, and Gaspard, while making a final effort, saw the current wrest his beam from his grasp and hurl it against us. The struggle had become impossible.

Marie and Véronique, clasped in each other’s arms, were repeating the same words in broken tones—words of terror the echo of which still sounds incessantly in my ears : ‘I will not die ! I will not die !’

Rose embraced them both, trying to reassure and comfort



them ; but at last she herself, trembling and shivering, lifted her white face and unconsciously cried aloud, ' I will not die ! '

Aunt Agathe alone remained quite silent. She had ceased praying and crossing herself. In a sort of dumb stupor she now let her eyes wander over the scene—and whenever they chanced to meet mine, she still attempted a smile.

The water was lapping the tiles. No help could reach us now. We still heard the sound of voices issuing from the church—two lanterns had gleamed for an instant in the distance, then again the silence deepened amid the desolate immensity of the yellow expanse. In all probability the people of Saintin who owned some boats had been surprised by the flood before us.

Gaspard was still wandering about the roof ; and suddenly he called to us, saying : ' Look out ! Help me—hold me tight ! '

He had again snatched hold of a passing timber, and was lying in wait for a huge black mass which was slowly swimming towards us. It was the broad, solid plank-roof of a shed, wrenched away entire, and floating like a raft. When it came within reach Gaspard arrested it, and feeling that he was being dragged off he called to us to help him. We seized him round the waist and clasped him tight. As soon as the wreck entered the current it advanced of its own accord against our roof, coming forward with so much violence that for a moment we feared we should see it fly asunder.

However, Gaspard boldly jumped upon this raft thus sent to us by Providence : he walked all over it to make sure of its strength, while Jacques and Pierre maintained it in position at the edge of our roof. Then he began to laugh, and said exultingly, ' You see, grandfather, we are saved. Come, you women, leave off crying ! It is as good

as a real boat. Look here, my feet are dry. It can carry us all, too. It feels like home already.'

However, he thought it better to strengthen it, and securing some more beams he bound them with some ropes which Pierre had happened to bring up with him on the chance of their being wanted. While thus engaged, Gaspard once fell overboard, but he soon came up again, and answered our cry of alarm with renewed hilarity.

'The Garonne knows me,' he laughed; 'I have often swum it for a league at a time.' Then when he had got on the roof again he shook himself and exclaimed, 'Come aboard—there's no time to lose!'

The women had fallen on their knees, and Gaspard had to carry Véronique and Marie to the middle of the raft, where he made them sit down. Rose and Agathe slipped off the tiles unaided and joined the girls. At that moment I again glanced towards the church. Aimée was still on the same roof, only she was now leaning against a chimney-stack, holding her children aloft with rigidly uplifted arms. The water had risen to her waist.

'Do not worry, grandfather,' said Gaspard. 'I promise you that we'll pick her up as we pass by.'

Pierre and Jacques were already on the raft. I jumped after them. It tilted over a little on one side, but seemed strong enough to carry us all. Gaspard was the last to leave the roof, and gave each of us one of the poles which he had in readiness to be used as oars, he himself keeping a very long one, which he handled with great dexterity. He had taken command, and by his instructions we all pressed against the tiles with our poles, trying to shove off. But our efforts were fruitless: the raft seemed to adhere to the roof; at every fresh attempt we made the current hurled us back against the house. We were incurring great danger, for every fresh shock threatened to shatter the boards on which we stood.

Once more we became conscious of our impotency. We had thought ourselves saved, but we still belonged to the greedy river. I even began to regret that the women had left the roof, for I expected, every minute, to see them hurled into the furious water and carried away. But when I suggested that we should return to the house they one and all rebelled.

‘No, no, let us try again,’ they pleaded, ‘or die here.’

Gaspard was not laughing now. We multiplied our efforts, weighing on the poles with feverish strength, but all in vain. At last Pierre had an idea. He climbed on to the roof again, and with a long rope managed to pull the raft to the left and get it out of the current. Then after he had jumped on to the raft again a few strokes of our poles enabled us to get into the open.

But Gaspard remembered his promise to rescue my poor Aimée, whose plaintive wail had not once ceased. To effect the rescue it was necessary to cross the street where raged that terrible current against which we had fought so desperately. He cast a questioning look at me. I was overcome. Never had I been placed in so cruel an alternative. Eight lives must be endangered, and yet, if for their sakes I hesitated just one moment, I lacked the strength to resist the mother’s lugubrious call.

‘Yes, yes,’ I said to Gaspard. ‘We cannot go without her.’

He bent his head in silence and began to ply his pole, taking advantage of such walls as were still standing. We slowly skirted the adjoining house, passing over our own cow-sheds, but as soon as we turned the bend of the street we shrieked aloud. The current had captured us again, and was carrying us off, forcing us back to our roof.

It lasted only a few seconds. We were indeed whirled away so suddenly that the screams we immediately raised expired amid the deafening crash of the raft against the tiles.

It was rent asunder, the shivered boards were scattered, and we were hurled into the foaming whirlpool. I do not know what followed. I only remember that as I fell I saw Aunt Agathe lying at full length on the water buoyed up by her skirts. Then without a struggle she slowly sank, her head thrown backwards.

A sharp pain made me open my eyes. Pierre was dragging me by the hair along the tiles. I remained lying there stupefied, with open eyes. Pierre had left me to dive again, and in the confusion of my mind I thought it strange when I espied Gaspard on the spot just vacated by my brother. The young man had Véronique in his arms. He laid her near me, plunged in again, and brought up Marie, who was so white, rigid, and motionless that I thought her dead. Then for the third time he threw himself into the water, but now he sought in vain and returned empty-handed. Pierre had joined him: they were talking low, and I could not hear what they said. As they were coming, seemingly quite exhausted, up the incline of the roof I moaned out—‘ And Aunt Agathe, and Jacques, and Rose ? ’

They shook their heads; big tears were welling in their eyes. From the brief, husky words they spoke, I gathered that Jacques’ brains had been dashed out by a passing beam. Rose had clung to her husband’s corpse and been dragged away with it. As for Aunt Agathe, she had not reappeared; we presumed that her body, driven forward by the current, had entered the house beneath us through one of the open windows.

Raising myself up, I turned towards the chimney-stack which Aimée had been clutching hold of a few moments previously. The flood had risen higher still; Aimée was no longer wailing; I only saw her two stiffened arms holding the children above the water. Then all collapsed: the sheet of water closed over her arms and her babes amid the sleepy glimmer of the full moon.



## V

THERE were now only five of us on the roof. The water had left us but a narrow dry strip on the crest of the tiles. One of the chimney-stacks had been swept away. We had to raise Véronique and Marie, who had fainted, and keep them erect, to prevent the surf from wetting their legs. At last they regained consciousness, and our anguish increased as we saw them shivering in their soaked garments, and heard them wailing that they would not die. We comforted them as one quiets children, assuring them that they were not going to die ; that we would prevent Death from taking them. But they no longer believed us ; they realised that their life was nearly spent. Each time that the word 'die' fell like a knell from their lips their teeth chattered, and mutual dread threw them into each other's arms.

It was the end. A few ruined walls marked here and there the spot where the submerged village had stood. The church, alone intact, raised its belfry on high, and a sound of voices still proceeded from it, telling of people who were safely sheltered. In the distance the vast overflow of the raging waters roared continuously. We no longer heard the crash of crumbling houses, resembling the rough unloading of gravel on a road. The wreck was forsaken as if it were in mid-ocean, a thousand miles from land.

Once we fancied that we detected a splash of oars on our left : it was like a rhythmical gentle beat growing clearer and nearer. Ah ! what a hopeful music it seemed ! We craned our necks forward to question space. We held our breath. But we saw nothing. The yellow expanse stretched out, spotted with black shadowy things, but none of those things, crests of trees, fragments of shattered



walls, were stirring. Tufts of herbage, empty barrels, planks, brought us delusive joys. We waved our handkerchiefs, till, recognising our error, we again became the prey of anxiety, wondering whence came the sound that ever fell upon our ears.

‘Ah, I see it!’ suddenly cried Gaspard; ‘a large boat—look! over there.’

And with his outstretched arm he pointed to a distant spot. Neither Pierre nor I could distinguish anything, but Gaspard obstinately insisted that it was a boat. The strokes of the oars became more distinct, and finally we all saw it. It was moving slowly, and seemed to be circling round us without drawing any nearer. I remember that we then became almost mad, waving our arms, raving, shouting, insanely apostrophising the boat, insulting it, and calling it a coward. The craft, still silent and dark, appeared to turn more slowly. Was it really a boat? I cannot tell; I only know that when we realised that it was gone, we felt that it had carried our last hope away.

After that we expected every second to be engulfed in the fall of the house. By this time it must be undermined, and was probably only held up by some stouter wall, which would drag down the whole building when it gave way. What especially terrified me was to feel the roof sinking under our weight; the house might possibly have resisted all night, but the tiles were loosened and broken by the attacking beams. We took refuge on the left, where the rafters seemed to be less impaired, but even there they soon seemed to weaken, and would infallibly yield if the five of us remained huddled together on so narrow a space.

For the last few moments my brother Pierre had mechanically placed his pipe between his lips again. He was twisting his thick, military-looking moustache, and

muttering confusedly, with his dark brows knit. The increasing peril which surrounded us on all sides, and against which there was no possible fighting, made him more and more irritated. He had two or three times spat into the water with angry contempt; then, as we were sinking more and more, he made up his mind, and walked down the slope of the roof.

‘Pierre ! Pierre !’ I cried, afraid to understand.

He turned and answered quietly, ‘Good-bye, Louis ; this lasts too long to suit me, and my going will give you more room.’

Then, having thrown his pipe into the water, he resolutely flung himself after it, adding : ‘Good-night ; I’ve had enough of it !’

He did not rise again ; he was but an indifferent swimmer, and no doubt he surrendered himself to the flood, broken-hearted by our ruin, the loss of those he loved, and feeling unwilling to survive them.

Two o’clock struck at the church tower. The night was almost over ; that horrible night, so full of agony and tears. The dry strip under our feet was gradually becoming smaller. There was a soft gurgle of running water, with little caressing wavelets playing and tossing. Then again the current changed ; the wreckage was carried to the right of the village, floating lazily along, as if the flood, now seemingly about to reach its greatest height, were resting, weary and satisfied.

All at once Gaspard removed his shoes and coat. During the last moment or two I had watched him wringing his hands and crushing his fingers. In answer to my question he said : ‘Listen, grandfather. It kills me to wait here. I cannot stop any longer. Let me act—I can save her !’

He was alluding to Véronique. I attempted to reason with him, saying that he would never be strong

enough to swim with the girl as far as the church. But he obstinately insisted, repeating: 'I love her—I shall save her!'

I remained silent, simply drawing Marie to my breast. He thought no doubt that I was reproaching him with his lover-like selfishness.

'I will come back for Marie,' he stammered; 'I swear it. I will find a boat somehow, and manage to get help. Trust me, grandfather!'

He stripped, merely retaining his trousers, and then in a low and hurried voice he gave some urgent advice to Véronique, telling her not to struggle, but to yield herself to him, and, above all, not to get alarmed. The girl stared at him, and huskily answered 'Yes' to each sentence he spoke.

At last, having made the sign of the Cross, although he was not habitually devout, he let himself slide down the roof, holding Véronique by a rope which he had passed under her arms. She gave a loud scream, beat the water with her limbs, and fainted away.

'It is best so!' shouted Gaspard. 'Now I can answer for her.'

With unspeakable anguish I watched their progress. On the white water I easily discerned Gaspard's slightest movements: he supported the girl by means of the rope which he had also twined around himself, and he had thrown her partially across his right shoulder. Her dead weight occasionally made him sink, but he rallied, swimming on with supernatural energy.

I was getting hopeful, for he had already covered one-third of the distance, when he struck against some obstacle—some wall hidden below the water's surface. The shock was appalling; they both disappeared. Then I saw Gaspard rise alone; the rope had broken. He plunged twice, and finally he reappeared, again carrying

Véronique. He slung her upon his back, but as the supporting rope was gone, she weighed him down more heavily than before. In spite of this he had still advancing. A moment later, as they neared the church, I began to tremble violently; then suddenly I attempted to call out, for I had caught sight of some floating timber coming upon them sideways. My mouth remained wide open—a second concussion parted them; then the waters met again, but they were gone.

From that moment I remained stupefied, retaining merely the animal instinct of self-preservation, and shrinking back whenever the water gained on me. Amidst this stupor I continued hearing a sound of laughter without understanding whence it came. The day was rising in a great white dawn; the air was pleasant, very fresh and very calm, as it is beside a mere before the sunrise. But laughter still rang out, and on turning round I saw Marie standing near me in her dripping garments. It was she who was laughing!

How sweet and gentle she looked, poor darling, amid the advent of the morning! I saw her stoop, take a little water in the hollow of her palm and bathe her face. Then she twisted her rich golden hair and bound it round her head. She was dressing: she fancied herself back in her little room preparing for church on a Sunday morning, while the bells were ringing merrily; and still she laughed her childish laughter, with a happy face and serene clear eyes.

Her madness was contagious, for I began to laugh with her; terror had demented her, and it was a mercy vouchsafed by Heaven, for she seemed conscious only of the enchanting beauty of the spring-tide dawn.

I watched her quietly, nodding gently, and without comprehending. She went on with her toilet till she considered herself ready to start, and then raising her



pure crystalline voice she began to sing one of her favourite hymns. Presently, however, she stopped, and, as if answering a call which she alone could hear, she cried : ' I am coming ! I am coming ! '

Then resuming her chant she descended the incline of the roof, and stepped into the water, which softly, tenderly closed over her without shock or struggle. For myself, I continued to smile, looking with a happy, contented face on the spot where she had disappeared.

After that I do not remember. I was quite alone on the roof, the water touching me. A single chimney-stack remained standing, and I think I must have clung to it with all my strength, like an animal who refuses to perish. Beyond that I know nothing—nothing—all is black and vacant in my mind.

## VI

WHY am I here ? I have been told that the people of Saintin arrived at about six o'clock with their boats, and found me in a dead faint hanging on to the chimney. The water had been so cruel as not to take me away with those I loved while I remained unconscious of my bereavement.

I—the old one—have obstinately lived on. All the others are gone, the children in swaddling-clothes, the girls and their lovers, the young and the old married couples. And yet I remain living like a coarse dry weed rooted to the stones. If I had the courage, I would do what Pierre did. Like him, I would say, ' Good-night, I have had enough of this,' and then I would fling myself into the Garonne, following the course that all the others have taken. I have not one child left me ; my house is a ruin ; my fields lie waste. Oh, for the nights when we all



sat at the table, the elders in the centre, the young ones in a row, when their merriment warmed my blood ! Oh, for the grand days of harvest and vintage, when we all toiled together and came home in the gloaming, exultant in the pride of our wealth ! Oh, for the handsome children and the fair vines, the lovely girls and the golden corn, the joy of my old age, the living reward of my whole life ! Now that all this is dead and gone, tell me, O God ! why wilt Thou have me stay ?

I cannot be comforted. I want no help. I shall give my land to those of the village folk who possess children—for they will have the heart to clear it and till it afresh. Those who have no children need but a corner wherein to die.

I have had one wish, a last desire—I wanted to find the corpses of my dear ones and to bury them in our churchyard, under a stone which would some day cover me also. I heard that a great many bodies which had been washed away by the river had been recovered at Toulouse ; so I started to go and see them.

Was there ever so ghastly a scene ? Nearly two thousand houses destroyed, seven hundred victims, all the bridges swept away, a whole district of the city razed, drowned in the mud ; poignant tragedies, twenty thousand wretches half naked and dying of starvation, the town poisoned by the stench of unburied corpses, and terrified by the fear of typhus. And mourning everywhere, funerals in all the streets, distress such as no alms could allay. But I walked on among the ruins of others, regardless of aught save my own—my own dear dead, the thought of whom weighed me down.

People told me that many bodies had been found, and that they had already been buried in long rows in the cemetery. However, the precaution had been taken to photograph the unrecognised ones. It was among the

piteous portraits shown me that I came across those of Gaspard and Véronique. The lovers were still clasped in a passionate embrace; they had given and received their nuptial kiss in death. They clung to each other so closely, mouth pressed to mouth, and arms entwined, that it would have been impossible to part them without breaking their limbs. So they had been photographed together, and they slept united beneath the sod.

And that is all I have left, that horrible picture of those two fair children, disfigured and swollen by the water, but still bearing on their livid faces the imprint of their heroic love. I gaze upon them and I weep.

## NAIS MICOULIN

### I

DURING the fruit season a brown-skinned little girl with bushy black hair used to come every month to the house of Monsieur Rostand, a lawyer of Aix, in Provence, bringing with her a huge basket of apricots or peaches, so heavy that she had hardly strength enough to carry it. She would wait in the large entrance-hall, whither all the family went to greet her.

‘So it’s you, Naïs,’ the lawyer would say. ‘You’ve brought us some fruit, eh? Come, you’re a good girl. And how is your father?’

‘Quite well, sir,’ replied the little girl, showing her white teeth.

Then Madame Rostand would take her into the kitchen and ask her about the olives, the almonds, and the vines. But the most important question was whether there had been any rain at L’Estaque, where the Rostands’ estate was situated, a place called La Blancarde, which was cultivated by the Micoulins. There were but a few dozen almond and olive trees, but the question of rain was none the less an important one in this province, where everything perishes from drought.

‘There have been a few drops,’ Naïs would say. ‘The vines want more.’

Then, having imparted her news, she ate a piece of bread and some scraps of meat, and set out again for L'Estaque in a butcher's cart which came to Aix every fortnight. Frequently she brought some shell-fish, a lobster, a fine eel, for Micoulin fished more than he tilled the ground. When she came during the holidays, Frédéric, the lawyer's son, used to rush into the kitchen to tell her that the family would soon take up their quarters at La Blancarde, and that she must get some nets and lines ready. He was almost like a brother to her, for they had played together as children. Since the age of twelve, however, she had called him 'Monsieur Frédéric,' out of respect. Every time old Micoulin heard her speak familiarly to the young man he boxed her ears, but in spite of this the two children were sworn allies.

'Don't forget to mend the nets,' repeated the school-boy.

'No fear, Monsieur Frédéric,' replied Naïs. 'They'll be ready for you.'

Monsieur Rostand was very wealthy. He had bought a splendid seignorial mansion in the Rue du Collège at a very low price. The Hôtel de Coiron, built during the latter part of the seventeenth century, had twelve windows in its frontage, and contained enough rooms to house a religious order. Amid those vast rooms the family, consisting of five persons, including the two old servants, seemed lost. The lawyer occupied merely the first floor. For ten years he had tried, without success, to let the ground and second floors, and finally he had decided to lock them up, thus abandoning two-thirds of the house to the spiders. Echoes like those of a cathedral resounded through the empty sonorous mansion at the least noise in the entrance-hall, an enormous hall with a staircase from which one could easily have obtained sufficient material to build a modern dwelling.

Immediately after his purchase, Monsieur Rostand had divided the grand drawing-room into two offices, by means of a partition. It was a room thirty-six feet long by twenty-four broad, lighted by six windows. Of one of the two parts he had formed his own private room, the other being allotted to his clerks. The first floor contained four other apartments, the smallest of which measured twenty feet by fifteen. Madame Rostand, Frédéric, and the two old servants had bedrooms as lofty as churches. The lawyer had been forced, for convenience' sake, to convert an old boudoir into a kitchen ; for at an earlier stage, when they had made use of the kitchen on the ground floor, the food, after passing through the chilly atmosphere of the entrance-hall and staircase, had come to table quite cold. To make matters worse, the gigantic apartments were furnished in the most sparing manner. In the lawyer's private room an ancient suite of furniture, upholstered in green Utrecht velvet, and of the stiff and comfortless-looking Empire style, did its best to fill up the space, with its sofa and eight chairs ; a little round table, belonging to the same period, looked like a toy in that immensity ; on the chimney-piece there was nothing beyond a horrible modern marble clock between two vases, whilst the tiled floor, looking much the worse for age, showed a dirty red. The bedrooms were more empty still. The whole house brought home to one the tranquil disdain which Southern families—even the richest of them—display for comfort and luxury, in that happy land of the sun, where life is mainly spent out of doors. The Rostands were certainly not conscious of the sad, mortal chilliness which brooded over those huge rooms, mainly though the scantiness and poverty-stricken aspect of the furniture.

Yet the lawyer was a shrewd man. His father had left him one of the best practices in Aix, and he had managed to improve it considerably by displaying an



amount of activity rare in that land of indolence. Small, brisk, weasel-faced, his sole thought was of his work. No other matters troubled his brain; he never even looked at a paper during the rare hours of idleness he spent at his club. His wife, on the contrary, had the reputation of being one of the cleverest and most accomplished women in the town. She was a De Villebonne, a fact which invested her with a certain amount of dignity, in spite of her *mésalliance*. But she was strait-laced to such a point, she practised her religious duties with such bigoted fortitude, that she had, as it were, become shrivelled up by the methodical life she led.

As for Frédéric, he grew up between his busy father and rigid mother. During his schoolboy days he was a dunce of the first water, trembling before his mother, but having such a distaste for work that he would often sit in the drawing-room during the evening poring for hours over his books without reading a single line, his mind wandering, whilst his parents imagined from the look of him that he was preparing his lessons. Irritated by his laziness, they put him to board at the college; but he then worked less than ever, being less looked after than at home, and delighted to feel that he was no longer under his parents' stern eyes. Accordingly, alarmed by the airs of liberty which he put on, they took him away, in order to have him under their ferule again. So narrowly did they look after him that he was forced to work: his mother examined his exercises, made him repeat his lessons, and mounted guard over him unremittingly like a gendarme. Thanks to this supervision, Frédéric failed but twice in passing the examination for his degree.

Aix is celebrated for its law school, and young Rostand was naturally sent to it. In that ancient town the population is largely composed of barristers, notaries, and solicitors practising at the Appeal Court. A youth takes

a law degree as a matter of course, following it up or not as he pleases. So Frédéric remained at the college, working as little as possible, but trying to make his parents believe that he was working a great deal. Madame Rostand, to her great sorrow, had been forced to give him more liberty. He now went out when he chose in the daytime, and was only expected to be at home to meals. He had, however, to be in by nine o'clock in the evening, except on those days when he was allowed to go to the theatre. Thus began that country student's life, so full of vice when it is not entirely devoted to work.

A person must know Aix, be acquainted with the quiet grass-grown streets, the state of torpor which enwraps the whole town, in order to understand the purposeless life which the students lead there. Those who work can manage to kill time over their books ; but those who refuse to exert themselves steadily have no other places where they can while away their leisure save the cafés and other resorts, where people gamble and drink, and call it 'seeing life.' Thus Frédéric soon became an inveterate gambler : he passed the greater part of his evenings at cards, and finished them elsewhere. When he found his evenings too short for him he managed, by stealing a key of the house door, to have all night as well. In this way his years of probation passed pleasantly enough.

Frédéric had sense enough to see that he must play the part of a tractable son. The hypocrisy of a child curbed by fear had little by little grown upon him. His mother now declared herself satisfied ; he took her to church, behaved most properly with her, told her with the greatest calmness the most unheard-of lies, which she believed, thanks to his air of candour. And so clever did he become in this respect that he never allowed himself to be outwitted, being always ready with an excuse, always prepared in advance with the most extraordinary stories in

support of his statements. He paid his gaming debts with money borrowed from his cousins, and his pecuniary transactions would have filled a book. Once, after an unhopèd-for stroke of good luck, he was able to turn a dream he had of spending a week in Paris into reality, by getting himself invited thither by a friend who had a little estate near the Durance.

Frédéric was a fine young fellow, tall, with regular features, and a black beard. His vices made him good company, especially with ladies. He was quoted for his good manners. Those who knew his goings on smiled a little, but, as he had the sense to throw a veil over this side of his life, he came in for a certain amount of credit for not making an exhibition of his excesses, as did other students who were the scandal of the town. .

Frédéric was nearly twenty-one, and was soon to pass his last examination. His father, who was still young and not inclined as yet to hand his practice over to him, talked of making him enter the magistrature to begin with. He had friends in Paris to whom he could apply to get him an appointment as public prosecutor's assessor. The young man raised no objection ; for he never openly opposed his parents ; but a certain expressive smile on his face betokened his firm determination to prolong the pleasant existence which suited him so well. He knew that his father was rich, that he was his only son, so why should he trouble himself ? In the meantime he smoked his cigar on the Promenade, gambled in the neighbouring cafés, and paid his attentions to a variety of damsels, though all this did not prevent him from holding himself at his mother's orders, and loading her with attentions. At times when he felt out of sorts he stayed at home in the huge gloomy mansion in the Rue du Collège, and enjoyed delicious repose. The emptiness of the rooms, the sense of constraint perceptible on every side, seemed

to him to possess a soothing influence. There he collected himself afresh, making his mother believe that he was stopping at home for her sake, until the day when, health and appetite having returned, he devised some fresh escapade. In one word, he was the best fellow in the world, so long as his pleasures were not interfered with.

Every year, however, Naïs came to the Rostands with her fish and fruit, and every year she grew. She was of the same age as Frédéric, or, to be correct, she was just three months older. Madame Rostand would often say to her :

‘ What a big girl you are growing, Naïs ! ’

And Naïs would smile, showing her white teeth. As a rule, Frédéric was not there ; but one day, during the last year of his probation, he was going out, when he found Naïs standing in the hall with her basket. He stopped short in astonishment. He did not recognise the girl, though he had seen her only the year before at La Blencarde. Naïs was looking superb, with her dark face beneath a swarthy covering of thick black hair, her broad shoulders, her supple waist, and her magnificent arms, of which the bare wrists were exposed. In a single year she had grown like a young tree.

‘ You ! ’ said he, in a hesitating voice.

‘ Yes, Monsieur Frédéric,’ replied Naïs, looking him in the face with her big eyes, in which a sombre fire smouldered. ‘ I’ve brought some sea-urchins. When are you coming ? Shall I get the nets ready ? ’

He was still looking at her, and muttering, as if he had not heard her speak : ‘ How handsome you are, Naïs ! What is there in you ? ’

The compliment made her smile. Then, as he took her hands playfully, as he had done in the days gone by, she became serious, and said in a hoarse whisper : ‘ No, no ; not here. Take care ! here comes your mother.’



## II

A FORTNIGHT later the Rostand family started for La Blancarde. The lawyer had to rest during the vacation, and September was a charming month at the seaside. The great heat was past, and the nights were deliciously cool.

La Blancarde was not actually in L'Estaque, a village situated on the extreme outskirts of Marseilles, and nestling among the rocks which bound the bay. The house was built on a cliff overlooking the village, and its yellow walls, glistening amongst the pines, could be seen from any part of the bay. It was one of those heavy square buildings, pierced with irregular windows, and called 'châteaux' in Provence. In front of the house a broad terrace extended, rising almost perpendicularly above the pebbly beach. Behind, there was a vast enclosure of poor land, upon which nothing but a few vines, almond or olive trees would grow. One of the inconveniences, indeed, one of the dangers, of La Blancarde was the fact that the sea was gradually eating away the cliff; infiltrations, proceeding from neighbouring springs, were constantly at work in that softening mountain of clay and rock; and every year enormous masses fell away, being precipitated with a deafening crash into the sea. The property was thus becoming smaller and smaller; the pines had already begun to fall.

The Micoulins had been settled at La Blancarde for forty years. According to the Provençal custom, they cultivated the land and shared the crops with the landlord. These crops were scanty, and they would have died of starvation if, during the summer, they had not turned their attention to the sea. Between tilling and sowing there came an interval of fishing. The family consisted



of Micoulin, a stern old man, with a black and seamy face, before whom the others trembled ; of his wife, a tall woman, whose intellect was dulled by hard toil in the blazing sun ; of a son, who at that time was serving on board the *Arrogant*, man-of-war ; and of Naïs, whom her father, in spite of her numerous tasks at home, sent to work at a tile manufactory. Rarely did the sound of a laugh or a song enliven the tenants' dwelling, a hovel built against one of the sides of La Blancarde. Micoulin, buried in his reflections, preserved gloomy silence. The two women exhibited towards him that cringing respect which Southern wives and daughters always display for the head of the family. It was not often that silence was broken, except it were by the mother's calls, as she stood with her hands on her hips, her throat ready to burst, shouting out the name of Naïs whenever her daughter disappeared. Naïs heard her a mile away, and returned home pale with stifled anger.

The handsome Naïs, as they call her at L'Estaque, was by no means happy. At the age of sixteen, Micoulin, on the slightest provocation, would strike her so roughly in the face as to make the blood fly from her nose ; and even now, in spite of her twenty years, her bruised shoulders bore the marks of her father's brutality for weeks together. Not that he was cruel ; he simply exercised a rigorous rule, insisting on implicit obedience, having in his blood the old Roman feeling of authority over his own family—the authority of life and death. One day Naïs, on being unmercifully thrashed, dared to raise her hand to defend herself, and her father came near killing her. After a correction of this kind, the girl would throw herself trembling into a dark corner, and, with dry eyes, brood over the insult. Black rage would hold her there mute for hours together, gloating over revenge, which lay beyond her power. It was her father's

blood which rose within her—his blind passion, his furious determination to be the master. When she saw her trembling and submissive mother humble herself before Micoulin, she looked at her with scorn. She would often say, ‘If I’d a husband like that, I’d kill him.’

And yet Naïs preferred those days when she was beaten, for this violence was a diversion. At other times she led such a dreary, monotonous life that it almost killed her. Her father forbade her to go down to L’Estaque, keeping her constantly at work at home; even when she had nothing to do, it was his will that she should stay there beneath his eye. Accordingly, she looked forward impatiently to September; for as soon as the family took up their quarters at La Blancarde Micoulin’s surveillance necessarily became less strict, and Naïs, who was wont to run errands for Madame Rostand, was only too glad to make up for all her imprisonment.

One day the idea struck old Micoulin that this big girl might bring him in a franc or two a day. So he emancipated her, and sent her to work at a tile manufactory. Although the labour was severe, Naïs felt delighted. She left home early, proceeded to the other side of L’Estaque, and remained until evening in the hot sun, turning over the tiles set out to dry. Sad work it made with her hands, but she was freed from her father, and she used to joke with the boys. Here it was, in the midst of this rough toil, that she filled out and became a handsome woman. The blazing sun tinted her face and decked her neck with a ring of amber; her black hair grew and enveloped her, as if to protect her with its flying tresses; her body, continually on the move during the progress of her work, acquired the supple vigour of a young warrior’s frame. When she stood up on the beaten ground at her full height amid the ruddy tiles, she looked like some Amazon, like a statue suddenly imbued with life by the rain of fire

falling from the sky. Micoulin glowered at her with his little eyes on seeing her so fair. She laughed too much ; it did not seem to him natural that a girl should be so happy. And he swore to himself he would throttle all lovers, should any ever venture to dangle around her !

Lovers ! Naïs might have had them by the dozen, but she gave them no encouragement. She tossed her head at all the youths. Her only friend was a hunchback who was employed at the same manufactory as herself—a little fellow called Toine, whom the Foundling Hospital of Aix had sent to L'Estaque, and who had remained there, adopted, so to say, by the district. This hunchback had a ringing laugh and a comical profile. Naïs found an attraction in his gentleness. She did what she liked with him, and often tormented him when she felt inclined to take vengeance on someone for her father's violence towards herself. All this, however, had no further consequences. People used to make sport of Toine, and Micoulin himself said : ' She's welcome to Toine ; I know her, she's too proud.'

That year, when Madame Rostand came to La Blancarde, she asked Micoulin to lend her Naïs, one of her servants being ill. Work was slack just then at the manufactory, and, moreover, Micoulin, although brutal towards his own family, was politeness itself with his masters ; he would not have refused, even if the request had been against his wishes. But that very day Monsieur Rostand was forced to go to Paris on sudden and important business, and Frédéric was thus left alone with his mother.

As a rule, on his arrival the young man was mad after outdoor exercise, and, intoxicated by the seaside air, he would go with Micoulin to set or draw up the nets ; or take long walks with Naïs in the gorges which abound in the neighbourhood of L'Estaque. Then his ardour cooled down, and he remained for whole days lying under

the pines on the edge of the terrace, half asleep and gazing at the sea, of which the monotonous azure finally palled upon him. As a rule, he had had enough of *La Blancarde* at the end of a fortnight, and was wont to invent some excuse in order to slip off to *Marseilles*.

That year, on the day after their arrival, Micoulin called Frédéric at sunrise. He was going to take up the traps, the long baskets with a narrow opening, in which deep-water fish are caught. But the young man turned a deaf ear to him. Fishing appeared to have lost its attraction, for when he got up he threw himself on his back under the pines, and fixed his eyes on the sky. His mother was astonished not to see him set off for one of the long walks from which he usually returned as hungry as a wolf.

‘ You are not going out ? ’ she asked.

‘ No, mother,’ he replied. ‘ I shall stop with you, as father is not here.’

Micoulin, who heard this, muttered in his dialect : ‘ It won’t be long before Monsieur Frédéric’s off to *Marseilles*.’

But Frédéric did not go to *Marseilles*. The week passed by and found him still stretched on his back, simply changing his position, whenever the sun rays fell on him. For appearance’ sake he had taken a book, but it was little he read ; the greater part of the time the book remained lying on the dry pine-spikes. The young man did not even look at the sea ; with his face turned towards the house, he appeared to be interested in the domestic arrangements, in watching the servants go backwards and forwards, crossing the terrace at every moment ; and whenever it was Naïs who happened to pass him, a flash shot from his eyes. But Naïs, although she would slacken her pace, and move off with the rhythmical sway of her body, never cast a look behind her.



For several days this comedy went on. In his mother's presence Frédéric treated Naïs almost roughly, as if she had been some awkward servant. Then the young girl would cast her eyes down in pleased bashfulness, as if enjoying the harsh words.

One morning at breakfast she broke a salad bowl, and Frédéric flew into a rage.

'How clumsy she is!' he cried. 'Wherever is her head?'

And he jumped up furiously, saying that his trousers were spoiled. A drop of oil had stained his knee, and it sufficed to make him raise the house.

'What are you staring at? Give me a napkin and some water. Come and help me,' he said to the girl.

Naïs dipped the corner of a napkin in some water, and went down on her knees in front of Frédéric to rub the spot.

'Don't bother,' said Madame Rostand. 'That will do no good.'

But the girl did not let go of her young master's trousers, which she went on rubbing with all the strength of her shapely arms, whilst he continued scolding her.

'I never saw such clumsiness. She must have brought it close to me on purpose to smash it. If she waited on us at Aix our china would soon be all in pieces,' he grumbled.

These reproaches were so out of proportion to the gravity of the offence that Madame Rostand thought proper to try and appease her son as soon as Naïs had gone.

'What have you against the poor girl? One would think that you could not endure her. Be more gentle with her. She is an old playmate of yours, and she is not in the position of an ordinary servant here.'

'Oh, she's a nuisance!' replied Frédéric, affecting a rough manner.



That evening at dusk, however, Naïs and Frédéric met in a shady spot at the end of the terrace. They had not yet spoken to one another alone. No one could hear them from the house. The pines filled the still air with a warm resinous odour. Then Naïs asked in a whisper, in the familiar way of their childhood :

‘ Why did you scold me so, Frédéric ? You were unkind.’

Without replying he caught hold of her hands, drew her towards him, and kissed her. She made no resistance, but afterwards went off, whilst he sat down on the parapet, in order not to appear before his mother in his then excited state. Ten minutes afterwards the girl was waiting at table with perfect and somewhat proud calmness.

Frédéric and Naïs made no appointments. Late one evening they found themselves together under an olive-tree, near the edge of the cliff. During dinner their eyes had several times exchanged glances. Then Naïs had gone home, and Frédéric had begun to roam about, possessed by a strange feeling. And indeed, when after a while he came to the old olive-tree, he found her there as if waiting for him. He sat down by her side and put his arm round her waist whilst she let her head fall upon his shoulder. For a moment they remained silent. The old olive-tree, with its gnarled limbs, covered them with a roof of grey leaves. Before them stretched the sea, motionless beneath the twinkling stars. Marseilles, on the far side of the bay, was hidden by a cloud ; on the left the revolving Planier light shone out every minute, piercing the gloom with a yellow ray which suddenly disappeared ; and nothing could be softer or more tender than this light, constantly vanishing on the horizon, and constantly returning.

‘ Is your father away ? ’ asked Frédéric.

‘ I got out of the window,’ she said, in her quiet voice. They spoke no word of their love. That love came

from afar, from the days of their infancy. The dawn was almost rising when they sought their rooms again.

## III

WHAT a glorious month it was ! Not one day of rain. The sky, invariably blue, displayed a satiny sheen unflecked by any cloud. The sun rose a ruddy crystal and sank in a cloud of golden dust. Yet it was not hot, for the sea breeze came with the sun, and though it died away when he set, the nights were deliciously cool, and balmy with the scent of aromatic plants diffusing the sweetness gathered during the day. The country is splendid. From both sides of the bay rocky arms jut out, whilst in the distance the islands seem to bound the horizon. In fine weather the sea appears to be nothing but a vast basin, a lake of an intense blue. In the distance, at the foot of the mountains, the houses of Marseilles climb up the low hills. When the atmosphere is clear one can see from L'Estaque the grey Joliette pier and the slender masts of the vessels in the port ; beyond, houses peep out from amongst clumps of trees, and the chapel of Notre-Dame-de-la-Garde glitters white against the sky. The coastline winds about and takes broad sweeps before reaching L'Estaque, where manufactories throw out intermittent clouds of smoke. When the sun sinks below the horizon, the sea, almost black, looks as if it were slumbering between the two rocky promontories, whose whiteness is relieved by tinges of yellow and brown ; pines, too, showing the dark green foliage against the reddish soil beyond. It is a vast panorama, a glimpse of the East, which departs, however, with the dazzling heat of day.

But L'Estaque has other sights besides the sea. The village, clinging to the mountain-side, is traversed by roads

which wind through a chaos of shattered rocks. The railway line between Marseilles and Lyons passes amid those masses, crosses bridges thrown over ravines, and plunges under the cliffs themselves, remaining there for a distance of some four miles in what is called the tunnel of La Nerthe, the longest tunnel in France. Nothing can equal the savage grandeur of those gorges hollowed out amongst the hills, those narrow paths winding along at the foot of precipices, those barren mountains, planted with pines, uprearing ramparts tinged as with rust and blood. Now and then a pass widens, a field of struggling olive-trees fills the hollow of a valley, a lonely house shows its white frontage and closed shutters. Then come other rugged paths, impenetrable thickets, overturned rocks, dried-up torrents—all the surprises of a desert march. Over all, above the black fringe of pines, the sky stretches its expanse of silky blue.

Then there is the narrow line of coast between the rocks and the sea, the red soil pitted with immense holes, from which is taken the clay for tile-making, the chief industry of the district. Everywhere the ground is cracked and sundered, supporting with difficulty a few sickly trees, and seemingly parched by a breath of burning passion. The roads are like beds of plaster, in which the traveller sinks to the ankles at every step; and flying clouds of dust powder the hedges at the least puff of wind. Little grey lizards sleep along side the hot walls, which reverberate like ovens, whilst from the scorched grass rise whirring clouds of locusts. In the still and heavy air of the sleepy South there is no other sign of life than the grasshopper's monotonous song.

It was in this land of fire that Naïs and Frédéric loved one another for a month. It was as if all the heat of the sky had entered their veins. For the first week they were satisfied with their nightly meetings under the same olive-

tree on the edge of the cliff. There they tasted untold bliss. The cool night soothed their fever ; they offered their burning cheeks and hands to the passing breeze, refreshing as a mountain spring. The sea broke with its slow voluptuous dirge over the rocks at their feet ; the penetrating odour of seaweed intoxicated them with passion.

Then, leaning on one another's arms, they would watch across the bay the lights of Marseilles, tinging the water at the mouth of the port with a reflection as of blood ; the twinkling gaslights, outlining the streets in many a graceful curve ; while in the midst of all, above the town, it seemed as if there were a mass of sparkling flame. The garden on the Colline Bonaparte was plainly distinguishable by a double row of lights mounting heavenwards. Those innumerable lights above the slumbering bay appeared to be illuminating some fairy town which the dawn would presently sweep away. And the sky, stretching over the black chaos of the horizon, also had its charm for them, a charm which alarmed and made them cling closer to one another. A rain of stars fell. On those clear Provençal nights the constellations resemble living flames. Shuddering beneath the vast space, they bowed their heads, turning their gaze on the solitary flicker of the Planier lighthouse, whose dancing scintillations stirred them, whilst their lips met again in a kiss.

But one night their eyes fell on the gigantic disc of the moon, glaring upon them with her yellow face. Out at sea a train of fire glittered, as if some enormous fish, some serpent from the depths, were trailing endless folds of golden scales ; and then the glitter of Marseilles and the outlines of the gulf were obscured. As the moon rose the light increased, the shadows became more sharply defined. That heavenly witness was unwelcome to them. They feared they might be surprised if they remained so near La Blencarde. So when they next met they left the spot



and walked into the shadowy open country. They found a meeting-place in a deserted tile-field; a ruined shed there concealed a pit in which two kilns remained still open. But the hovel saddened them; they preferred to have the open sky above their heads. So they explored the clay-pits, they discovered delightful nooks, perfect little deserts, whence they could hear nothing but the barking of watch-dogs. They prolonged their walks, wandering along the rocky coast in the direction of Niolon, following the course of the narrow gorges in search of distant grottoes and crevasses. For a fortnight they thus spent their nights. The moon had now disappeared, the sky had become dark again; but it seemed to them as if *La Blancarde* were too small to hold their love, as if they needed all the limitless expanse beyond it.

One night, as they were following a path above *L'Estaque* in order to gain the gorges of *La Nerthe*, they fancied they could hear a muffled step keeping pace with their own behind a plantation of pines stretching beside the road. They stopped in alarm.

‘Do you hear that?’ asked *Frédéric*.

‘Yes; some stray dog,’ whispered *Naïs*.

And they continued on their way. But, at the first bend in the road, after leaving the pines, they distinctly saw a dark object glide behind the rocks. It was certainly a human being, curiously shaped, looking indeed as if it were humpbacked. *Naïs* uttered an exclamation.

‘Wait here,’ she said quickly.

And then she darted in pursuit of the shadow. Presently *Frédéric* heard the sound of rapid whispering. She returned composed, but rather pale.

‘What is it?’ he asked.

‘Nothing,’ she replied.

Then after a moment’s silence she continued: ‘If you



hear any steps, don't be alarmed. It's Toine—you know the hunchback. He wants to keep watch over us.'

And in fact Frédéric was occasionally conscious of somebody following them in the darkness. It was as if a protecting arm were stretched over them. More than once Naïs tried to drive Toine away; but the poor fellow merely asked to be her dog: he would not be seen, he would not be heard, why should he not be allowed to do as he pleased? From that time forward, if the lovers had listened attentively as they kissed in the lonely gorges, they would have caught the sound of smothered sobs behind them. It was Toine, their watch-dog, weeping in his horny hands.

But at last those walks no longer sufficed them. They grew emboldened and took advantage of other opportunities to meet. Madame Rostand, who saw nothing, still blamed her son for being over-rough towards his old playmate. Yet one day she almost surprised them kissing.

After dinner, when the evening was cool, Madame Rostand often liked to go for a walk. She then took her son's arm and went down to L'Estaque, telling Naïs to bring her shawl as a measure of precaution. They went all three of them to see the sardine-fishers come in. Out at sea the lanterns danced, and soon the dark silhouettes of the boats could be discerned, nearing the beach, amid a muffled sound of oars. On good days joyous voices would ring out, and the women would hurry down, laden with baskets; while the three men who manned each boat set to work to empty the net, which, as it lay under the thwarts, looked like a broad dark ribbon dotted with flashes of silver. The sardines, hanging by the gills to the meshes, still struggled and threw out a metallic lustre. Then they fell into the baskets, like a shower of crown pieces, amid the pale light of the lanterns. Madame Rostand would often leave her son's arm to talk to the fishermen standing

near a boat, interested by the sight, whilst Frédéric, standing at Naïs's side, outside the radius of light, clasped the girl's hands in a burst of passion. Meantime old Micoulin preserved stubborn silence. He went out fishing and came home to do a day's work, with ever the same deep look on his face. But at last his little grey eyes assumed an uneasy expression. He threw side glances at Naïs without saying a word. She seemed to him changed, there was something about her that he could not quite understand. One day she ventured to argue with him, and he thereupon gave her a blow which cut her lip.

That evening, when Frédéric saw her mouth swollen he questioned her anxiously.

'It's nothing ; only a blow my father gave me,' she said.

Her tone was gloomy. And as the young man became angry and declared that he would see into it, 'No, never mind,' she said, 'it's my business. There'll soon be an end to it.'

She never told him of the beatings which she received. Only on the days when her father had treated her cruelly she kissed her lover with more ardour, as if to avenge herself on the old man.

Naïs had at first taken the most minute precautions in going to meet Frédéric ; but at last rashness seized hold of her. Then, imagining from her father's manner that he suspected something, her prudence returned. She missed two appointments, as her mother told her that Micoulin did not sleep at night, but got up and went about from one door to another. However, on the third day, seeing Frédéric's distress, the girl once more forgot all prudence. She went out at about eleven o'clock, resolving that she would not remain more than an hour absent ; and she was in hopes that her father, being in his first sleep, would not hear her.

Frédéric was waiting for her under the olive-trees. Without telling her fears, she refused to go farther. They sat down in their usual place, looking at the sea and the glow of Marseilles. The Planier light was beaming. As Naïs watched it she fell asleep on Frédéric's shoulder. He did not move, and, gradually yielding to fatigue himself, his own eyes closed.

No sound ; only the chirrup of the grasshopper. The sea slept like the lovers. But suddenly a dark form came forth from the gloom and approached them. It was Micoulin, who, awakened by the creaking of a window, had missed Naïs from her room. He had left the house, taking a small hatchet with him. When he saw a dark mass under the olive-tree he grasped the handle of the implement. But the children did not stir, he was able to walk up to them, bend down, and look in their faces. A slight exclamation escaped him as he recognised his young master. No, no, he could not kill him thus : the blood spilt on the ground would leave traces behind it, and would cost him too dear. A peasant does not openly murder his master, for the master, even when he lies under the ground, is always the stronger. As Micoulin stood there, however, a look of savage determination came over his tanned face. At last he shook his head and went off stealthily, leaving the lovers asleep.

When Naïs returned to her room shortly before day-break, much alarmed at having stayed away so long, she found her window just as she had left it. At breakfast Micoulin calmly watched her eat her bread. She felt safe, her father certainly knew nothing.

## IV

'AREN'T you coming out fishing any more, Monsieur Frédéric?' asked Micoulin one evening.

Madame Rostand was sitting on the terrace in the shade of the pines, embroidering a handkerchief, whilst her son, lying at her feet, was amusing himself by throwing pebbles.

'Not I,' replied the young man. 'I'm getting lazy.'

'You are wrong,' continued Micoulin. 'The traps were full of fish yesterday. You can catch as many as you like just now. You'd like it. Come with me to-morrow morning.'

He said this so good-humouredly that Frédéric, who thought of Naïs, and did not want to fall out with the father, finally exclaimed: 'Very well, then. But you'll have to call me. I shall still be sound asleep at five o'clock.'

Madame Rostand, feeling rather uneasy, had ceased working.

'Mind you are careful,' she said. 'I am always anxious when you are on the water.'

Next morning Micoulin shouted to Frédéric in vain; the young man's window remained closed. Upon this he said to his daughter, with a savage irony which she did not detect: 'You go. He'll hear you, perhaps.'

Thus it was Naïs who woke Frédéric that morning. Ten minutes later the young man appeared, clad from head to foot in grey canvas. Old Micoulin was sitting on the parapet of the terrace, patiently waiting for him.

'It's cool, you'd better take a wrapper,' he said.

Naïs went to fetch one, and afterwards the two men descended the steep steps which led to the sea, whilst the girl, standing above, followed them with her eyes. At



the bottom old Micoulin raised his head and looked at Naïs; there were deep creases at the corners of his mouth.

For the last five days the north-east wind, the mistral, had been blowing. On the previous day it had fallen at evening, but when the sun rose it returned, at first rather gently. At that early hour the sea, lashed by the sudden gusts, was of a deep mottled blue; and the white-crested waves, illumined by the first slanting rays, chased one another over the bosom of the deep. The sky was almost white, and clear as crystal. In the distance Marseilles stood out with a distinctness which enabled one to count the windows in the fronts of the houses, whilst the rocks in the gulf were bathed in a delicate rosy haze.

‘We shall have our work cut out to get back again,’ said Frédéric.

‘Very likely,’ replied Micoulin.

He plied his oars silently, without turning his head. The young man looked for a moment at his bent back, noting his sunburnt neck and his red ears, from which little rings of gold were hanging. Then he leant over the side of the boat, gazing into the depths. The sea became rougher, and big shadowy weeds floated by, looking like tufts of some drowned man’s hair. This saddened and even alarmed Frédéric a little.

‘I say, Micoulin,’ he remarked, after a long silence, ‘the wind’s getting stronger. Be careful; you know that I swim like a lump of lead.’

‘Yes, yes; I know,’ replied the old man, in a dry voice.

Still he continued rowing, in mechanical fashion. Then the boat began to pitch, the white foam on the crests of the waves turned into clouds of spray, which flew before the wind. Frédéric did not want to exhibit his alarm,



but he felt very uncomfortable, and would have given a great deal to have been on land again. At last he grew angry, and exclaimed: 'Where the devil have you stuck your traps? Are we bound for Algiers?'

But old Micoulin, without seeming to trouble himself, again replied: 'We're all right; we're all right.'

All at once he let go the oars, stood up in the boat, and looked toward the shore, as if for certain guiding marks; there was still some five minutes' rowing to be accomplished before getting among the cork buoys which showed where the traps were placed. Once there, while Micoulin was drawing up the baskets, he remained for a few seconds with his face turned towards La Blancarde. Frédéric, following the direction of his eyes, distinctly saw a white form under the pines. It was Naïs, still leaning on the parapet.

'How many traps have you?' asked Frédéric.

'Thirty-five; and we mustn't stop here any longer than we can help,' said Micoulin.

He laid hold of the buoy nearest to him, and drew the first basket in. The depth was enormous, there was no end to the rope. At last the trap appeared, with the large stone which had kept it at the bottom, and as soon as it left the water three fish began to leap about like birds in a cage. It seemed as if one could hear the beating of wings. In the second basket there was nothing; but in the third was found a somewhat rare capture—a small lobster, which flourished its tail violently. Frédéric was all attention now, forgetting his fears, leaning over the side of the boat, and awaiting the baskets with beating heart. Whenever he heard a sound as of wings, he felt like a sportsman who has just brought down his game. One by one, however, the baskets were drawn into the boat, the water meantime streaming around; and soon the whole thirty-five were secured. There were at

least fifteen pounds of fish—a splendid catch for the Gulf of Marseilles, which from several causes, especially the extremely fine mesh of the nets which are used, has been yielding less and less fish for many years past.

‘That’s the lot,’ said Micoulin. ‘Now we can make for home.’

He had carefully arranged his baskets in the stern ; but when Frédéric saw him prepare to set the sail, he remarked that, with such a wind blowing, it would be more prudent to row. The old man shrugged his shoulders. He knew what he was about. And, before hoisting the sail, he cast a last look in the direction of La Blancarde. Naïs’s white dress was still there.

Then came the catastrophe, as sudden as a thunderbolt. Afterwards, when Frédéric tried to think over what had happened, he remembered that all at once a gust had caught the sail, and that all had then overturned. He could not call anything else to mind, save a feeling of intense cold and bitter agony. He owed his life to a miracle ; he had fallen on the sail, which kept him afloat. Some fishermen, having seen the accident, hastened to his help, and picked him up, as well as old Micoulin, who was already swimming towards the shore.

Madame Rostand was still asleep, and they concealed from her the danger which her son had incurred. At the foot of the terrace, Frédéric and Micoulin, dripping with water, found Naïs, who had witnessed the scene.

‘Devil take it!’ cried the old man. ‘We’d taken up the traps and were coming home. Bad luck to it all!’

Naïs, who was deadly pale, looked fixedly at her father.

‘Yes,’ she muttered, ‘it’s bad luck. But when you sail in a wind like that, you know what to expect.’

Micoulin flew into a rage.

‘What’s that to do with you, lazybones? Can’t you

see Monsieur Frédéric's shivering ? Help me to get him indoors.'

The young man escaped with a day in bed, and told his mother that he had a headache. The next day he found Naïs very dispirited. She refused to meet him out of doors again, though one evening, in the passage, she kissed him passionately. She never told him of her suspicions, but from that day forward she watched over him. Then, at the end of a week, her fears began to diminish. Her father went about as usual ; he even seemed kinder, and beat her less often.

Every year the Rostands used to go to eat a *bouillabaisse* in a hollow of the rocks on the shore, in the direction of Niolon. Afterwards, as partridges abounded amongst the hills, the gentlemen would organise a shooting party. That year Madame Rostand wanted to take Naïs to wait on them, and refused to listen to Micoulin's remarks when the old savage attempted to raise some objection.

They set out early. The morning was a charming one. Lying like a mirror beneath the gleaming sun was the blue expanse of the sea ; ripples appeared amid the currents, where the blue was tinged with violet, whilst in apparently stagnant spots the azure faded away into a milky transparency. You might have imagined the sea to be an immense piece of shot satin, whose changing colours grew more and more indistinct as the limpid horizon was reached. And over that slumbering lake the boat glided very softly.

The narrow beach on which they landed was at the mouth of a gorge, and they settled down on a strip of scorched grass which was to serve as a table.

How enjoyable that picnic was ! First of all Micoulin set off alone in the boat to take up the baskets which he had set the day before. By the time he came back Naïs

had gathered some thyme and lavender and enough dry wood to make a large fire. That day the old man was to make the *bouillabaisse*, the classic fish soup, the secret of which the coast fishermen transmit from father to son. And a terrible *bouillabaisse* it was, with its strong doses of pepper, and odour of crushed garlic. The Rostands were greatly interested in the preparation of the savoury mess.

‘Micoulin,’ said Madame Rostand, ‘do you think you will be as successful as last year?’

The old man seemed to be in excellent spirits. First of all he washed the fish in sea water, whilst Naïs took the large pan out of the boat. Soon all was in progress: the fish at the bottom of the vessel, just covered with some water, with some onion, oil, garlic, a handful of pepper, and a tomato; then the whole was placed on the fire, a formidable fire, large enough to roast a sheep. Fishermen say that the goodness of *bouillabaisse* lies in the cooking: the pan must disappear amid the flames. Micoulin gravely cut some slices of bread into a salad bowl, and at the end of half an hour he poured the liquor on the slices, serving up the fish separately.

‘Come along,’ he said. ‘It’s not good unless it’s hot.’

Then the *bouillabaisse* was devoured with the usual jokes.

‘I say, Micoulin, did you put any gunpowder in it?’

‘It’s very good, but it wants a throat of brass to swallow it.’

Micoulin devoured his share tranquilly, swallowing a slice of bread at each mouthful, and showing at the same time how flattered he felt at eating with his masters.

Having finished, they sat there waiting for the heat of the day to pass off. The glistening rocks covered with ruddy streaks threw grateful shadows around. Clumps of evergreen oaks showed sombre foliage, whilst on the slopes the rows of pines ascended in regular lines, looking



like little soldiers on the march. An oppressive silence filled the quivering air.

Madame Rostand had brought the endless embroidery, which was never seen to leave her hands. Naïs, seated at her side, seemed to be interested in the movements of her needle. But her eyes were really on her father. He was lying on his back a few paces away enjoying a siesta. Then, farther still, Frédéric also was sleeping beneath the protecting shade of his broad-brimmed straw hat.

At about four o'clock they awoke, and Micoulin declared that he knew of a covey of partridges at the bottom of a ravine. He had seen them three days previously, so Frédéric allowed himself to be tempted, and they both took their guns.

'Pray be careful,' said Madame Rostand. 'You might slip and hurt yourself.'

'Yes, that does happen sometimes,' said Micoulin quietly.

They then went off, and as they disappeared behind the rocks, Naïs jumped up and followed them at a distance, muttering: 'I'm going to see.'

Instead of keeping to the pathway at the bottom of the gorge, she turned to the left among the bushes, hurrying along and avoiding the loose stones for fear of setting them rolling. At length, at a bend of the road, she espied Frédéric walking quickly, slightly bent, and ready to lift his gun to his shoulder. As yet she saw nothing of her father, but presently she discovered him on the same slope as herself: he was crouching down, looking towards the gorge, and he seemed to be waiting for something. Twice he raised his gun. Supposing the partridges flew up between the two sportsmen, Micoulin and Frédéric might shoot one another. Naïs, gliding from bush to bush, anxiously took up a position behind the old man.

Some minutes passed. On the other side Frédéric had



disappeared in a dip in the ground, but finally he reappeared, and remained for an instant motionless. Then Micoulin, still crouching down, took a long aim at the young man. But with a kick Naïs knocked the barrel of his gun upward, and the charge went off in the air with a fearful report which brought down all the echoes of the gorge.

The old man sprang to his feet. On seeing Naïs, he seized the gun by its smoking barrel, as if he meant to dash her to the earth with one blow. But the girl stood her ground, her cheeks as white as death, her eyes darting fire. He dared not strike her, and, trembling with rage, he could only stammer out in dialect : ' I'll kill him, never you fear ! '

At the report of the gun the partridges had flown off, Frédéric winging two of them. And about six o'clock the Rostands returned to La Blancarde, old Micoulin rowing with his accustomed air of sullen, stubborn brutishness.

## V

SEPTEMBER was drawing to an end. After a violent storm the air had become very cool. The days grew shorter, and Naïs refused to meet Frédéric out of doors at night-time. However, as she reached the house every morning at six o'clock, and Madame Rostand did not get up till nine, the lovers still had opportunities for converse.

It was now that Naïs showed the greatest affection for Frédéric. She would take hold of his neck, draw his face towards hers, and look into it with a passion which filled her eyes with tears. It was as if she feared that she might never see him more. And she showered kisses upon him as if to protest and swear that she would guard him.

‘What is the matter with Naïs?’ Madame Rostand would often remark. ‘She changes every day.’

Indeed she was becoming thinner, and quite pale. The fire in her eyes was dying away. She often remained for a long while silent, and then would give a start, looking alarmed like a girl awakening from a bad dream.

‘You are ill, my child; you must take care of yourself,’ repeated her mistress.

But Naïs would smile and answer:

‘Oh, no, madame, I’m quite well and happy! I’ve never been so happy.’

One morning, as she was helping to count the linen, she ventured to ask a question.

‘Are you going to stop late at La Blancarde this year?’

‘Till the end of October,’ replied Madame Rostand.

Naïs stood still for a moment with fixed eyes; then she unconsciously said aloud: ‘Twenty days more.’

A continual struggle was going on within her. She wished to keep Frédéric near her, and yet at the same time she was constantly tempted to cry out, ‘Go!’

He was lost to her; never would that season of love return; she had felt it from their first meeting. One night of gloomy despair she had even gone so far as to wonder whether she ought not to allow her father to kill Frédéric, so that he might never love another; but the idea of seeing him dead—he so delicate, so fair, more like a girl than herself—was unbearable to her, and the evil thought filled her with horror. No, she would save him, and he should never know of it. He might love her no longer, but she would be happy in the thought that he still lived.

She would often say to him, ‘Don’t go to sea to-day; the weather will be rough.’ At other times she pressed him to leave La Blancarde: ‘You must be sick of being

here ; you won't love me any longer. Go to town for a few days.'

These changes of humour surprised him. He thought her less handsome, now that her face had become drawn ; and besides his was a very fickle temperament. He began to pine for the eau de Cologne and the rice powder of the beauties of Aix and Marseilles.

Meantime the old man's words were constantly ringing in Naïs' ears : ' I'll kill him, I'll kill him ! ' In the middle of the night she would wake up, thinking that she had heard shots fired. She became timid, and screamed whenever a stone rolled away from under her feet. When Frédéric was out of her sight, she was always worrying about him ; and what terrified her most was that from morning to night she still seemed to hear Micoulin repeating, ' I'll kill him ! ' The old man however, preserved, stubborn silence, he never made any allusion to what had passed, either by word or gesture ; but for her, his every look, his every movement implied that he would kill his young master at the first opportunity he might have of doing so without being disturbed. And afterwards he would deal with Naïs. In the meantime he kicked her about like some disobedient dog.

' Does your father still use you badly ? ' Frédéric asked the girl one morning.

' Yes,' she replied ; ' he's going mad.'

And after showing him her arms, which were black with bruises, she muttered these words, which she often whispered to herself : ' It'll soon be over, it'll soon be over.'

At the beginning of October she became more gloomy than ever. She was absent-minded, and one could often see her lips move as if she were talking to herself. On several occasions Frédéric perceived her standing on the cliff, seemingly examining the trees around her and

measuring the depth of the abyss. A few days later he discovered her with Toine the hunchback, plucking figs on the farthest part of the estate. Toine used to come and help her whenever she had too much to do. He was under the fig-tree, and Naïs, who had mounted on a thick branch, was joking with him, calling to him to open his mouth, and then throwing down figs which burst upon his face. The poor fellow opened his mouth as he was bidden, and closed his eyes in ecstasy, whilst his huge face expressed complete beatitude. Frédéric was certainly not jealous, but he could not refrain from taking Naïs to task.

‘Toine would cut off his hand for us,’ she said curtly. ‘We mustn’t ill-treat him, he may be useful later on.’

The hunchback continued coming to La Blancarde every day. He worked on the cliff, where he was cutting a narrow canal to bring some water to the end of an experimental kitchen garden. Naïs used to go and watch him, and lively talk would ensue between them. He was so long over the task that old Micoulin finally called him a lazybones and kicked his legs, as he would have done his daughter’s.

Rain fell on two successive days. Frédéric, who had to return to Aix the following week, determined that before leaving he would once more go out fishing with Micoulin. And seeing Naïs turn pale he laughed and replied ‘that he should not choose a day when the mistral was blowing.’ Then, as he was to leave so soon, the young girl consented to meet him once more. They met late at night on the terrace. The rain had cleansed the earth, and a strong odour rose from all the freshened vegetation. When that usually parched country is thoroughly soaked, all its colours and odours become intensified : the red earth looks like blood, the pines are of an emerald green, the rocks of the whiteness of freshly-



washed linen. However, that night, all that the lovers could detect was the enhanced perfume of the thyme and lavender bushes.

Old associations led them to the olive-trees. Frédéric was walking towards one which had sheltered their first love-meeting—it stood quite at the edge of the cliff—when Naïs, as if aroused from a reverie, caught hold of his arm, dragged him from the edge, and said, trembling, ‘No, no ; not there !’

‘Why, what is the matter ?’ he asked.

She hesitated, and finally remarked that after such a fall of rain the cliff was not safe. And she added : ‘Last winter there was a landslip here.’

They sat down farther back, under another olive-tree. And at last Naïs convulsively burst into tears, and would not say why she was crying. Afterwards a frigid silence took possession of her, and when Frédéric joked her about her sadness and apathy in his company she murmured :

‘No, don’t say that. I love you too much. But I’m not in good health : and, besides, it’s all over. You’re going away.’

He vainly tried to comfort her, telling her that he would come again from time to time, and that next autumn he would spend two months there. But she shook her head ; she knew very well that all was over now.

Their meeting ended in embarrassing silence ; they gazed at the sea ; Marseilles was glittering with gas lamps, but the Planier lighthouse showed only a solitary mournful gleam ; and gradually the horizon imparted to them some of its own melancholy. At three o’clock, when Frédéric quitted Naïs, kissing her, he felt her shudder.

He could not sleep when he got back into the house ; he read till dawn, and then, feeling feverish, he took up a position at the window. Just at that moment Micoulin was starting off to take up his traps. As the old man



passed along the terrace he raised his head and asked Frédéric if he were coming with him that morning.

‘No,’ replied Frédéric; ‘I’ve slept too badly. To-morrow.’

The old fellow went off with a slouching gait. He had to go down to his boat at the foot of the cliff, just under the olive-tree, where he had surprised his daughter. When he had disappeared, Frédéric, on turning his head, was astonished to see Toine already at work; the hunch-back was standing near the olive-tree with a pickaxe in his hand, repairing the narrow channel which the rain had damaged. The air was cool; it was pleasant at the window. Frédéric went to make a cigarette, and as he lounged back to the casement a terrible crash—a roll of thunder as it seemed—was suddenly heard. He rushed to the window. It was a landslip. He could only distinguish Toine, who was running for his life, flourishing his pickaxe, amid a cloud of red dust. At the edge of the abyss the old olive-tree, with its gnarled branches, had pitched forward, crashing into the sea. A cloud of spray flew up, while a terrible cry rent the air. Then Frédéric saw Naïs leaning over the parapet, her stiffened hands clutching at the stonework, while her eyes peered into the depths below. There she stood, motionless and expectant, with her hands pressed to the low wall. Still, she no doubt divined that somebody was looking at her, for she turned her head, saw Frédéric, and cried: ‘My father! my father!’

An hour afterwards they found Micoulin’s mutilated body under the stones. Toine, almost crazy, related how he had almost been carried away himself; and everybody declared that it was wrong to carry a stream along the top of the cliff, on account of the infiltrations.

The old wife wept a great deal. As for Naïs, she followed her father to the cemetery with tearless eyes

On the day after the catastrophe, Madame Rostand had insisted upon returning to Aix. Frédéric was very pleased to leave, for the terrible drama had disturbed his peace of mind ; and, moreover, in his opinion, peasant girls with all their good looks were not equal to their town-bred sisters. He resumed his old mode of life. His mother, touched by his attentiveness to her at La Blancarde, gave him more liberty, so that he passed a very pleasant winter, and fondly hoped that his life would always thus glide smoothly away.

Monsieur Rostand had to go to La Blancarde at Easter, and wished his son to accompany him ; but the young man made various excuses. When the lawyer came back, he said the next morning at breakfast : ‘ Oh ! by the way, Naïs is going to be married.’

‘ Never ! ’ cried Frédéric in amazement.

‘ And you’d never guess to whom,’ continued Monsieur Rostand. ‘ She gave me such good reasons, however.’

The fact was Naïs was marrying Toine. In that way nothing would be changed at La Blancarde. Toine would still manage the property, as he had done since Micoulin’s death.

The young man listened with an awkward smile. Presently he expressed the opinion that the arrangement was the best one possible for everybody concerned.

‘ Naïs has grown very old and plain,’ continued Monsieur Rostand. ‘ I didn’t know her again. It is astonishing how quickly girls age on the coast ; and she used to be quite pretty, too.’

‘ Yes, a feast of sunlight,’ said Frédéric composedly, and he quietly went on eating his cutlet.

# ANGELINE

## I

NEARLY two years ago I was spinning on my bicycle over a deserted road towards Orgeval, above Poissy, when the sudden sight of a wayside house caused me such surprise that I sprang from my machine to take a better look at it. It was a brick-built house, with no marked characteristics, and it stood under the grey November sky, amid the cold wind which was sweeping away the dead leaves, in the centre of spacious grounds planted with old trees. That which rendered it remarkable, which lent it an aspect of fierce, wild, savage strangeness of a nature to oppress the heart, was the frightful abandonment into which it had fallen. And as part of the iron gate was torn away, and a huge notice-board, with lettering half-effaced by the rain, announced that the place was for sale, I entered the garden, yielding to curiosity mingled with uneasiness and anguish.

The house must have been unoccupied for thirty or, perhaps, forty years. The bricks of the cornices and facings had been disjoined by past winters, and were overgrown with moss and lichen. Cracks, suggestive of precocious wrinkles, scarred the frontage of the building, which still looked strong, though no care whatever was now taken of it. The steps below, split by frost, and

shut off by nettles and brambles, formed, as it were, a threshold of desolation and death. But the frightful mournfulness of the place came more particularly from its bare, curtainless, glaucous windows, whose panes had been broken by stone-throwing urchins, and which, one and all, revealed the desolate emptiness of the rooms, like dim eyes that had remained wide open in some soulless corpse. Then, too, the spacious garden all around was a scene of devastation ; the old flower-beds could scarce be discerned beneath the growth of rank weeds ; the paths had disappeared, devoured by hungry plants ; the shrubberies had grown to virgin forests ; there was all the wild vegetation of some abandoned cemetery in the damp gloom beneath the huge and ancient trees, whose last leaves were that day being swept off by the autumn wind, which ever shrieked its doleful plaint.

Long did I linger there amidst that despairing wail of Nature, for though my heart was oppressed by covert fear, by growing anguish, I was detained by a feeling of ardent pity, a longing to know and to sympathise with all the woe and grief that I felt around me. And when at last I had left the spot and perceived across the road, at a point where the latter forked, a kind of tavern, a hovel where drink was sold, I entered it, fully resolved to question the folks of the neighbourhood.

But I only found there an old woman who sighed and whimpered as she served me a glass of beer. She complained of living on that out-of-the-way road, along which not even a couple of cyclists passed each day. And she talked on interminably, telling me her story, relating that she was called Mother Toussaint, that she and her man had come from Vernon to take that tavern, that things had turned out fairly well at first, but that all had been going from bad to worse since she had become a widow. When, after her rush of words, I began to question her



respecting the neighbouring house, she suddenly became circumspect, and glanced at me suspiciously as if she thought that I wished to tear some dread secret from her.

‘Ah, yes,’ said she, ‘La Sauvagière, the haunted house, as people say hereabouts. . . . For my part, I know nothing, monsieur, it doesn’t date from my time. I shall have only been here thirty years come next Easter, and those things go back to well-nigh forty years now. When we came here the house was already much as you see it. The summers pass, the winters pass, and nothing stirs unless it be the stones that fall.’

‘But why,’ I asked—‘why is the place not sold, since it is for sale?’

‘Ah! why? Why? Can I tell? People say so many things.’

I was doubtless beginning to inspire her with some confidence. Besides, at heart she must have been burning to tell me the many things that people said. She began by relating that not one of the girls of the neighbouring village ever dared to enter La Sauvagière after twilight, for rumour had it that some poor wandering soul returned thither every night. And, as I expressed astonishment that such a story could still find any credit so near to Paris, she shrugged her shoulders, tried to talk like a strong-minded woman, but finally betrayed by her manner the terror she did not confess.

‘There are facts that can’t be denied, monsieur. You ask why the place is not sold? I’ve seen many purchasers arrive, and all have gone off quicker than they came; not one of them has ever put in a second appearance. Well, one matter that’s certain is that as soon as a visitor dares venture inside the house some extraordinary things happen. The doors swing to and fro and close by themselves with a bang, as if a hurricane were sweeping past. Cries, moans, and sobs ascend from



the cellars, and if the visitor obstinately remains, a heart-rending voice raises a continuous cry of 'Angeline ! Angeline ! Angeline !' in such distressful, appealing tones that one's very bones are frozen. I repeat to you that this has been proved, nobody will tell you otherwise.'

I must own that I was now growing impassioned myself, and could feel a little chilly quiver coursing under my skin. 'And this Angeline, who is she ?' I asked.

'Ah ! monsieur, it would be necessary to tell you all. And, once again, for my part I know nothing.'

Nevertheless, the old woman ended by telling me all. Some forty years previously—in or about 1858—at the time when the triumphant Second Empire was ever *en fête*, Monsieur de G——, a Tuileries functionary, lost his wife, by whom he had a daughter some ten years old—Angeline, a marvel of beauty, the living portrait of her mother. Two years later, Monsieur de G—— married again, espousing another famous beauty, the widow of a general. And it was asserted, that from the very moment of those second nuptials, atrocious jealousy had sprung up between Angeline and her stepmother : the former stricken in the heart at finding her own mother already forgotten, replaced so soon by a stranger ; and the other tortured, maddened, by always having before her that living portrait of a woman whose memory, she feared, she would never be able to efface. La Sauvagière was the property of the new Madame de G——, and there one evening, on seeing the father passionately embrace his daughter, she, in her jealous madness, it was said, had dealt the child so violent a blow, that the poor girl had fallen to the floor dead, her collar-bone broken. Then the rest was frightful : the distracted father consenting to bury his daughter with his own hands in a cellar of the house in order to save the murderess ; the remains lying there for years, whilst the child was said to be living with

an aunt; and at last the howls of a dog and its persistent scratching of the ground leading to the discovery of the crime, which was, however, at once hushed up by command of the Tuileries. And now Monsieur and Madame de G—— were both dead, while Angeline again returned each night at the call of the heartrending voice that ever cried for her from out of the mysterious spheres beyond the darkness.

‘Nobody will contradict me,’ concluded Mother Toussaint. ‘It is all as true as that two and two make four.’

I had listened to her in bewilderment, resenting certain improbabilities, but won over by the brutal and sombre strangeness of the tragedy. I had heard of this Monsieur de G——, and it seemed to me that he had indeed married a second time, and that some family grief had overclouded his life. Was the tale true, then? What a tragical and affecting story! Every human passion stirred up, heightened, exasperated to madness; the most terrifying love tale there could be, a little girl as beautiful as daylight, adored, and yet killed by her stepmother, and buried by her father in the corner of a cellar! There was here more matter for horror and emotion than one might dare to hope for. I was again about to question and discuss things. Then I asked myself what would be the use of it? Why not carry that frightful story away with me in its flower—such indeed as it had sprouted from popular imagination?

As I again sprang upon my bicycle I gave La Sauvagière a last glance. The night was falling and the woeful house gazed at me with its dim and empty windows akin to the eyes of a corpse, whilst the wail of the autumn wind still swept through the ancient trees.

## II

WHY did this story so fix itself in my brain as to lead to real obsession, perfect torment? This is one of those intellectual problems that are difficult to solve. In vain I told myself that similar legends overrun the rural districts, and that I had no direct concern in this one. In spite of all, I was haunted by that dead child, that lovely and tragic Angeline, to whom every night for forty years past a desolate voice had called through the empty rooms of the forsaken house.

Thus, during the first two months of the winter I made researches. It was evident that if anything, however little, had transpired of such a dramatic disappearance, the newspapers of the period must have referred to it. However, I ransacked the collections of the National Library without discovering a line about any such story. Then I questioned contemporaries, men who had formerly had intercourse with Tuileries society; but none could give me a positive reply, I only obtained contradictory information. So much so that, although still and ever tortured by the mystery, I had abandoned all hope of getting to the truth, when chance one morning set me on a fresh track.

Every two or three weeks I paid a visit of good-fellowship, affection, and admiration to the old poet V——, who died last April on the threshold of his seventieth year. Paralysis of the legs had, for many years previous, riveted him to an armchair in his study of the Rue d'Assas, whose window overlooked the garden of the Luxembourg. He there peacefully finished a dreamy life, for he had ever lived on imagination, building for himself a palace of ideality, in which he had loved and suffered far away from the real. Who of us does not remember his refined

and amiable features, his white hair curly like a child's, his pale blue eyes, which had retained the innocence of youth? One could not say that he invariably told falsehoods. But the truth is that he was prone to invention, in suchwise that one never exactly knew at what point reality ceased to exist for him and at what point dreaming began. He was a very charming old man, long since detached from life, one whose words often filled me with emotion as if indeed they were a vague, discreet revelation of the unknown.

One day, then, I was chatting with him near the window of the little room which a blazing fire ever warmed. It was freezing terribly out of doors. The Luxembourg gardens stretched away white with snow, displaying a broad horizon of immaculate purity. And I know not how, but at last I spoke to him of *La Sauvagière*, and of the story that still worried me—that father who had remarried, and that stepmother, jealous of the little girl; then the murder perpetrated in a fit of fury, and the burial in a cellar. V—— listened to me with the quiet smile which he retained even in moments of sadness. Then silence fell, his pale blue eyes wandered away over the white immensity of the Luxembourg, whilst a shade of dreaminess, emanating from him, seemed to set a faint quiver all around.

‘I knew Monsieur de G—— very well,’ he said. ‘I knew his first wife, whose beauty was superhuman; I knew the second one, who was no less wondrously beautiful; and I myself passionately loved them both without ever telling it. I also knew Angeline, who was yet more beautiful than they, and whom all men a little later would have worshipped on their knees. But things did not happen quite as you say.’

My emotion was profound. Was the unexpected truth that I despaired of at hand, then? At first I felt no



distrust, but said to him, 'Ah! what a service you render me, my friend! I shall at last be able to quiet my poor mind. Make haste to tell me all.'

But he was not listening, his glance still wandered far away. And he began to speak in a dreamy voice, as if creating things and beings in his mind as he proceeded with his narrative.

'At twelve years of age Angeline was one in whom all woman's love, with every impulse of joy and grief, had already flowered. She it was who felt desperately jealous of the new wife whom every day she saw in her father's arms. She suffered from it as from some frightful act of betrayal; it was not her mother only who was insulted by that new union, she herself was tortured, her own heart was pierced. Every night, too, she heard her mother calling her from her tomb, and one night, eager to rejoin her, overcome by excess of suffering and excess of love, this child, who was but twelve years old, thrust a knife into her heart.'

A cry burst from me. 'God of heaven! Is it possible?'

'How great was the fright and horror,' he continued, without hearing me, 'when on the morrow Monsieur and Madame de G—— found Angeline in her little bed with that knife plunged to its very handle in her breast! They were about to start for Italy; of all their servants, too, there only remained in the house an old nurse who had reared the child. In their terror, fearing that they might be accused of a crime, they induced the woman to help them, and they did indeed bury the body, but in a corner of the conservatory behind the house, at the foot of a huge orange-tree. And there it was found on the day when, the parents being dead, the old servant told the story.'

Doubts had come to me while he spoke, and I scrutinised him anxiously, wondering if he had not



invented this. 'But,' said I, 'do you also think it possible that Angeline can come back each night in response to the heartrending, mysterious voice that calls her?'

This time he looked at me and smiled indulgently once more.

'Come back, my friend? Why, everyone comes back! Why should not the soul of that dear dead child still dwell in the spot where she loved and suffered? If a voice is heard calling her 'tis because life has not yet begun afresh for her. Yet it will begin afresh, be sure of it; for all begins afresh. Nothing is lost, love no more than beauty. Angeline! Angeline! Angeline! She is called, and will be born anew to the sunlight and the flowers.'

Decidedly, neither belief nor tranquillity came to my mind. Indeed, my old friend V——, the child-poet, had but increased my torment. He had assuredly been inventing things. And yet, like all visionaries, he could, perhaps, divine the truth.

'Is it all true, what you have been telling me?' I ventured to ask him with a laugh.

He in his turn broke into gentle mirth. 'Why, certainly it is true. Is not the infinite all true?'

That was the last time I saw him, for soon afterwards I had to quit Paris. But I can still picture him, glancing thoughtfully over the white expanse of the Luxembourg, so tranquil in the convictions born of his endless dream, whereas I am consumed by my desire to arrest and for all time determine Truth, which ever and ever flees.

### III

EIGHTEEN months went by. I had been obliged to travel; great trials and great joys had impassioned my life amidst the tempest-gust which carries us all onwards the Unknown.

But at certain moments still I heard the woeful cry, 'Angeline! Angeline! Angeline!' approach from afar and penetrate me. And then I trembled, full of doubt once more, tortured by my desire to know. I could not forget; for me there is no worse hell than uncertainty.

I cannot say how it was that one splendid June evening I again found myself on my bicycle on the lonely road that passes La Sauvagière. Had I expressly wished to see the place again, or was it mere instinct that had impelled me to quit the highway and turn in that direction? It was nearly eight o'clock, but, those being the longest days of the year, the sky was still radiant with a triumphal sunset, cloudless, all gold and azure. And how light and delicious was the atmosphere, how pleasant was the scent of foliage and grass, how softly and sweetly joyous was the far-stretching peacefulness of the fields!

As on the first occasion, amazement made me spring from my machine in front of La Sauvagière. I hesitated for a moment. The place was no longer the same. A fine new iron gate glittered in the sunset, the walls had been repaired, and the house, which I could scarce distinguish among the trees, seemed to have regained the smiling gaiety of youth. Was this, then, the predicted resurrection? Had Angeline returned to life at the call of the distant voice?

I had remained on the road, thunderstruck, still gazing, when a halting footfall made me start. I turned and saw Mother Toussaint bringing her cow back from a neighbouring patch of lucerne. 'So those folks were not frightened, eh?' said I, pointing to the house.

She recognised me and stopped her beast. 'Ah, monsieur!' she answered, 'there are people who would tread on God Himself! The place has been sold for more than a year now. But it was a painter who bought it, a

painter named B——, and those artists, you know, are capable of anything ! ’

Then she drove on her cow, shaking her head and adding : ‘ Well, well, we must see how it will all turn out.’

B——, the painter, the delicate and skilful artist who had portrayed so many amiable Parisiennes ! I knew him a little ; we shook hands when we met at theatres and shows, wherever, indeed, people are apt to meet. Thus, all at once, an irresistible longing seized me to go in, make my confession to him, and beg him to tell me what he knew of this Sauvagière, whose mystery ever haunted me. And without reasoning, without thought even of my dusty cycling suit, which custom, by the way, is now rendering permissible, I opened the gate and rolled my bicycle as far as the mossy trunk of an old tree. At the clear call of the bell affixed to the gate a servant came ; I handed him my card and he left me for a moment in the garden.

My surprise increased still more when I glanced around me. The housefront had been repaired, there were no more cracks, no more disjointed bricks ; the steps, girt with roses, were once more like a threshold of joyous welcome ; and now the living windows smiled and spoke of the happiness behind their snowy curtains. Then, too, there was the garden rid of its nettles and brambles, the flower-bed reviviscent, resembling a huge and fragrant nosegay, and the old trees, standing amid the quietude of centuries, rejuvenated by the golden rain of the summer sun.

When the servant returned he led me to a drawing-room, saying that his master had gone to the neighbouring village, but would soon be home. I would have waited for hours. At first I took patience in examining the room, which was elegantly furnished, with heavy carpets, and window and door curtains of cretonne similar to that which upholstered the large settee and the deep arm-chairs. The hangings

were, indeed, so full that I felt astonished at the sudden fall of the daylight. Then came darkness almost perfect. I know not how long I stayed there ; I had been forgotten, no lamp even was brought me. Seated in the gloom, I once again yielded to my dreams and lived through the whole tragic story. Had Angeline been murdered? Or had she herself thrust a knife into her heart? And I must confess it, in that haunted house, where all had become so black, fear seized upon me—fear which was at the outset but slight uneasiness, a little creeping of the flesh, and which afterwards grew, froze me from head to foot, till I was filled with insane fright.

It seemed to me at first that vague sounds were echoing somewhere. 'Twas doubtless in the depths of the cellars. There were low moans, stifled sobs, footsteps as of some phantom. Then it all ascended and drew nearer, the whole dark house seemed to me full of that frightful anguish. All at once the terrible call arose, 'Angeline! Angeline! Angeline!' with such increasing force that I fancied I could feel a puff of icy breath sweep across my face. A door of the drawing-room was flung open violently, Angeline entered and crossed the room without seeing me. I recognised her in the flash of light which came in with her from the hall, where a lamp was burning. 'Twas really she, the poor dead child, twelve years of age, so marvellously beautiful. Her splendid fair hair fell over her shoulders, and she was clad in white; she had come all white from the grave, whence every night she rose. Mute, scared, she passed before me, and vanished through another door, whilst again the cry rang out farther away, 'Angeline! Angeline! Angeline!' And I—I remained erect, my brow wet with perspiration, in a state of horror, which made my hair stand on end, beneath the terror-striking blast that had come from the Mysterious.

Almost immediately afterwards, I fancy, at the



moment when a servant at last brought a lamp, I became conscious that B——, the painter, was beside me, shaking my hand and apologising for having kept me waiting so long. I showed no false pride, but, still quivering with dread, I at once told him my story. And with what astonishment did he not at first listen to me, and then with what kindly laughter did he not seek to reassure me!

‘You were doubtless unaware, my dear fellow, that I am a cousin of the second Madame de G——. Poor woman! To accuse her of having murdered that child, she who loved her and wept for her as much as the father himself did! For the only point that is true is that the poor little girl did die here, not, thank Heaven! by her own hand, but from a sudden fever which struck her down like a thunderbolt, in such wise that the parents forsook this house in horror and would never return to it. This explains why it so long remained empty even in their lifetime. After their death came endless lawsuits, which prevented it from being sold. I wished to secure it myself, I watched for it for years, and I assure you that since we have been here we have seen no ghost.’

The little quiver came over me again, and I stammered, ‘But Angeline, I have just seen her, here, this moment! The terrible voice was calling her, and she passed by, she crossed this room!’

He looked at me in dismay, fancying that my mind was affected. Then, all at once, he again broke into a sonorous, happy laugh.

‘It was my daughter whom you saw. It so happens that Monsieur de G—— was her godfather; and in memory of his own dear daughter he chose for her the name of Angeline. No doubt her mother was calling her just now, and she passed through this room.’

Then he himself opened a door, and once more raised the cry: ‘Angeline! Angeline! Angeline!’



The child returned, not dead, but living, sparkling with juvenile gaiety. 'Twas she in her white gown, with her splendid fair hair falling over her shoulders, and so beautiful, so radiant with hope, that she looked like an incarnation of all the springtide of life, bearing in the bud the promise of love and the promise of long years of happiness.

Ah ! the dear *revenante*, the new child that had sprung from the one that was no more ! Death was vanquished. My old friend, the poet V——, had told no falsehood. Nothing is lost, renascence comes to all, to beauty as well as love. Mothers' voices call them, those lasses of to-day, those sweethearts of to-morrow, and they live afresh beneath the sun, amid the flowers. And 'twas that awakening of youth that now haunted the house—the house which had once more become young and happy, in the joy at last regained that springs from life the eternal.

# NANTAS

## I

THE room in which Nantas had resided since his arrival from Marseilles was on the top floor of a house in the Rue de Lille, next to the mansion of Baron Danvilliers, a member of the Council of State. This house belonged to the baron, who had built it on the site of some old out-buildings. By leaning out of his window, Nantas could see a corner of the baron's garden, across which some magnificent trees cast their shade. Beyond, by looking over their leafy crests, a glimpse of Paris was to be had: the open space left by the Seine, with the Tuileries, the Louvre, the quays, a whole sea of roofs, and the Père Lachaise Cemetery in the dim distance.

Nantas's room was a small attic, with a dormer-window amid the tiles. He had furnished it simply with a bed, a table, and a chair. He had taken up his abode there because he was attracted by the low rent, and had made up his mind to rough it until he found a situation of some kind. The dirty paper, the black ceiling, the general misery and barrenness of this garret did not deter him. Living in sight of the Louvre and the Tuileries, he compared himself to a general sleeping in some miserable inn at the roadside within view of the

wealthy city which he means to carry by assault on the morrow.

Nantas's story was a short one. The son of a Marseilles mason, he had begun his studies at the Lycée in that city, stimulated by the ambitious affection of his mother, who had set her heart upon making a gentleman of him. His parents had stinted themselves to give him a good education ; but, his mother having died, Nantas had been obliged to accept an unprofitable situation in the office of a merchant, where for twelve years he had led a life of exasperating monotony. He would have taken himself off a score of times, if his sense of filial duty had not tied him to Marseilles, for his father, who had fallen from a scaffolding, was quite unable to work. One night, however, when Nantas returned home, he found the old fellow dead, with his pipe lying still warm at his side. Three days later the young man had sold the few sticks about the place, and started for Paris, with just two hundred francs in his pocket.

Nantas had inherited boundless ambition from his mother. He was a young fellow of ready decision and firm will ; and even when quite a boy he had been wont to say that he was a power. He was often laughed at when he so far forgot himself as to repeat his favourite expression confidently, 'I am a power,' an expression which sounded comical indeed when one looked at him in his thin black coat, all out at the elbows, and with the cuffs half-way up his arms. However, he had gradually made power a religion, seeing nothing else in the world, and feeling convinced that the strong are necessarily the successful. According to his idea, to be willing and able ought to suffice one. All the rest was of no importance.

One Sunday, while he was walking about alone, in the scorching suburbs of Marseilles, he felt genius within him ; in his innermost being there was, as it were, an

instinctive impulse driving him onwards; and when he went home to eat a plateful of potatoes with his bedridden father, he determined in his own mind that some day or other he would carve his own way in that world in which, at the age of thirty, he was still a nonentity. This was no low greed, no appetite for vulgar pleasures on his part; it was the clearly-defined longing of a will and intellect which, not being in their proper sphere, strove to attain to that sphere by the natural force of logic.

As soon as Nantas felt the paving-stones of Paris under his feet, he thought that he had merely to put forth his hands to find a situation worthy of him. On the very first day he began his search. He had been given various letters of introduction, which he presented; and, moreover, he called upon several of his own countrymen, thinking that they would help him. But at the end of a month there was still no result. The times were bad, people said; besides which, they merely made promises to break them. His little store of money was swiftly diminishing—indeed, at the most, some twenty francs were left him. It was upon those twenty francs, however, that he was forced to live for another month, eating nothing but bread, scouring Paris from morning till evening, and going home to bed without a light, feeling tired to death, and still as poor as ever. His courage did not fail him; but mute anger arose within him. Destiny appeared to be illogical and unjust.

One evening Nantas returned home supperless. He had finished his last morsel of bread on the day before. No money, and not a friend to lend him even a franc. Rain had been falling all day, one of those raw downfalls which are so cold in Paris. Rivers of mud were running in the streets, and Nantas, drenched to the skin, had gone to Bercy and afterwards to Montmartre, where he had been told of employment. But the situation at Bercy was filled up, and at Montmartre they had decided that his

handwriting was not good enough. Those were his two last hopes. He would have accepted anything, with the certainty that he would soon command success. He only asked for bread at first, something to live upon in Paris, a foundation-stone upon which he might build his fortune. He walked slowly from Montmartre to the Rue de Lille with his heart full of bitterness. The rain had ceased falling, and busy throngs crowded the streets. He stopped for a few minutes in front of a money-changer's office. Five francs would perhaps suffice him to become one day the master of them all. On five francs he could indeed live for a week, and in a week a man may achieve great things. While he was dreaming thus a cab ran against him and splashed him with mud. He then walked on more quickly, setting his teeth and experiencing a savage desire to rush with clenched fists upon the crowd which barred his way. It would have been taking a kind of vengeance for the cruelty of fate.

In the Rue Richelieu he was almost run over by an omnibus, but he made his way to the Place du Carrousel, whence he threw a jealous glance at the Tuileries. On the Saints-Pères Bridge a little well-dressed girl obliged him to deviate from the straight path which he was following with the obstinacy of a wild boar tracked by hounds, and this deviation appeared to him a supreme humiliation. The very children impeded his progress! Finally, when he had taken refuge in his room, as a wounded animal returns to its lair to die, he threw himself heavily upon his chair, dead-beat, gazing at his trousers which the mud had stiffened, and at his worn-out boots which had left wet marks along the floor.

The end had come then. Nantas debated how he should kill himself. His pride held good, and he imagined that his suicide would injure Paris. To be a power, to feel one's own worth, and not to find a soul to appreciate you, not one to give you the first crown which you have



ever wanted ! It seemed monstrous to him, and his whole being revolted at the thought. Then he felt immense regret as his glance fell upon his useless arms. No work had any terror for him. With the tip of his little finger he would have raised the world ; and yet there he was, cast into a corner, reduced to impotence, and fuming with impatience like a caged lion ! But presently he became calmer, death seemed to him grander. When he was a little boy he had been told the story of an inventor who, having constructed a marvellous machine, had one day smashed it to pieces with a hammer because of the indifference of the world. Well, he was like that man, he bore within him a new force, a rare mechanism of intelligence and will, and he was about to destroy his machine by dashing out his brains in the street.

The sun was going down behind the tall trees of the Danvilliers mansion ; an autumn sun it was, with golden rays lighting up the yellow leaves. Nantas rose as if attracted by the farewell beams of the heavenly body. He was about to die, he wanted light. For a moment he leant out of the window. Between the masses of foliage he had often seen a tall, fair young girl walking with a queenly step in the garden. He was not romantic, he had passed that age when young men in garrets dream that well-born ladies approach them with their love and fortunes. Yet it chanced that, at this supreme hour of suicide, he suddenly recollected that fair and haughty girl. What could be her name ? He knew not. But at the same time he clenched his fists, for his only feeling was one of hatred for the inhabitants of that mansion, glimpses of whose luxury were afforded him by the partially opened windows ; and he muttered in a burst of rage :

‘ I would sell myself, I would sell myself, if some one would only give me the first coppers I need for my fortune to come ! ’

This idea of selling himself occupied his mind for a moment. If there had been such a place as a pawn-shop where people advanced money on energy and willingness, he would have gone and pledged himself. He set about imagining cases : a politician might buy him to make a tool of him, a banker to make use of every atom of his intelligence ; and he accepted, scorning honour, and telling himself that it would suffice if he some day acquired strength and ended by winning the fight. Then he smiled. Did a man ever get a chance to sell himself ? Rogues, who watch every opportunity, die of want, without finding a purchaser. Now that suicide seemed his only course, he was fearful lest he should be overcome by cowardice, and he tried in this way to divert his thoughts. He had sat down again, swearing that he would throw himself out of the window as soon as it was dark.

So great was his fatigue, however, that he fell asleep upon his chair. Suddenly he was awakened by the sound of a voice. It was the doorkeeper of the house, who was showing a lady into his room.

‘ Sir,’ the doorkeeper began, ‘ I took the liberty to come up——’

Then, seeing no light in the room, she quickly went downstairs and fetched a candle. She seemed to know the person whom she had brought with her, and showed herself at once complaisant and respectful.

‘ There,’ said she, on leaving the room, after placing the candle on the table, ‘ you can talk at your ease : nobody will disturb you.’

Nantas, who had awoke with a start, looked with astonishment at the lady who had called upon him. She had now raised her veil, and appeared to be about five-and-forty, short, very stout, and with the face of a devotee. He had never seen her before. When he offered her the only chair, casting an inquiring glance at her, she gave

her name: 'Mademoiselle Chuin—I have come, sir, to talk to you about a very important matter.'

Nantas had sat down on the edge of the bed. The name of Mademoiselle Chuin told him nothing, and his only course was to wait until she should think fit to explain herself. But she seemed in no hurry to do so; she had given a glance round the tiny room, and appeared to be hesitating as to the way in which she might start the conversation. Finally she spoke in a very gentle voice, emphasising her remarks with a smile.

'Well, sir, I come as a friend. I have been told your touching story. Do not think that I am a spy; my only wish is to be of use to you. I know how full of trials your life has been till now, with what courage you have struggled to find a situation, and the final result of all your painful efforts. Once more, sir, forgive me for intruding upon you. I assure you that sympathy alone——'

Nantas, however, did not interrupt her; his curiosity was aroused, and he surmised that the doorkeeper of the house had furnished the lady with all those particulars. Mademoiselle Chuin, being at liberty to continue, seemed solely desirous of paying compliments and putting things in the most attractive way.

'You have a great future before you, sir,' she resumed. 'I have taken the liberty to follow your endeavours, and I have been greatly struck by your praiseworthy courage in misfortune. In one word, in my opinion there is a great future before you, if some one gives you a helping hand.'

She stopped again. She was waiting for a word. The young man, who believed that the lady had come to offer him a situation, replied that he would accept anything. But she, now that the ice was broken, asked him point-blank:

'Would you have any objection to marry?'

‘Marry!’ cried Nantas. ‘Goodness, madame! who would have me? Some poor girl that I could not even feed!’

‘No; a very pretty girl, very rich, splendidly connected, and who will at once put you in possession of the means to attain to the highest position.’

Nantas laughed no longer.

‘Then what are the terms?’ he asked, instinctively lowering his voice.

‘The girl has had a misfortune and you must assume responsibility,’ said Mademoiselle Chuin; and, putting aside her unctuous phraseology in her desire to come straight to the point, she gave some details.

Nantas’s first impulse was to turn her out of doors.

‘It’s an infamous thing to propose,’ he muttered.

‘Infamous!’ exclaimed Mademoiselle Chuin, affecting her honied tones again, ‘I can’t admit that ugly word. The truth is, sir, that you will save a family from despair. Her father knows nothing as yet; this misfortune has not long fallen upon her, and it was I myself who conceived the idea of thus marrying her as soon as possible. I know her father; it would kill him if nothing were done. My plan would soften the blow; he would think the wrong half-redressed. The unfortunate part of it is that the real culprit is married. Ah! sir, there are men who really have no moral sense.’

She might have gone on like this for a long while, for Nantas was not listening to her. He was thinking, why should he refuse? Had he not been proposing to sell himself a little while back? Very well, here was a buyer. Fair exchange is no robbery. He would give his name, and he would be given a situation. It was an ordinary contract. He looked at his muddy trousers, and felt that he had eaten nothing since the day before; all the disgust born of two months’ struggling and humiliation rose up



within him. At last he was about to set his foot on the world which had repulsed him, and driven him to the verge of suicide!

‘I accept,’ he said curtly.

Then he asked for clear explanations from Mademoiselle Chuin. What did she want for her services? She protested at first that she wanted nothing. However, she ended by claiming twenty thousand francs out of the dowry which the young man would receive. And as he did not haggle over the terms, she became expansive.

‘Listen,’ she said, ‘it was I who thought of you, and the young lady did not refuse when I mentioned your name. Oh! you will thank me later on. I might have got a title; I know a man who would have jumped at the chance. But I preferred to choose some one outside of the poor child’s sphere. It will appear more romantic. And then I like you. You are good-looking, and have plenty of sense. You will make your way; and you mustn’t forget me. Remember that I am devoted to you.’

So far no name had been mentioned, and upon Nantas making an inquiry in this respect the old maid stood up and said, introducing herself afresh:

‘Mademoiselle Chuin; I have been living as governess in Baron Danvilliers’ family since the baroness’s death. I educated Mademoiselle Flavie—the baron’s daughter. Mademoiselle Flavie is the young lady in question.’

Then she withdrew, after formally placing on the table an envelope containing a five hundred franc note. It was an advance which she herself made to defray preliminary expenses.

When Nantas found himself alone he went to the window again. The night was very dark; nothing was to be seen but the dark masses of shadow cast by the trees; one window only in the gloomy frontage of the mansion showed a light. So it was that tall fair girl who walked



with such a queenly step, and did not deign to notice him. She or some other, what mattered it? The girl was no part of the bargain. Then Nantas raised his eyes still higher, upon Paris roaring in the gloom, upon the quays, the streets, the squares, upon the whole left bank of the river, illuminated by the flickering gaslights: and like a superior being he addressed the city, saying:

‘Now you are mine!’

## II

BARON DANVILLIERS was sitting in the room which served him as a study, a cold lofty apartment, furnished with old-fashioned leather-covered furniture. For the last two days he had been in a state of stupor, Mademoiselle Chuin having informed him of what had befallen Flavie. In vain had she softened and toned down the facts; the old man had been overcome by the blow, and it was only the thought that the culprit was in a position to offer the sole reparation possible that kept him from death. That morning he was awaiting the visit of this man, who was utterly unknown to him, but who had robbed him of his daughter. He rang the bell.

‘Joseph, a young man will call, whom you will show in here at once. I am not at home to anybody else,’ he said.

Sitting alone at his fireside he brooded bitterly. The son of a mason, a starveling without any position! Mademoiselle Chuin had certainly spoken of him as a promising youth, but what a disgrace to a family whose honour had hitherto been stainless! Flavie had accused herself with a kind of passionate eagerness, so as to acquit her governess of the slightest blame. Since the painful scene between them she had kept her room, and, indeed,

the baron had refused to see her. Before forgiving her he was determined to look into the matter. All his plans were laid. But his hair had grown whiter, and his head shook with age.

‘Monsieur Nantas,’ announced Joseph.

The baron did not rise. He simply turned his head and looked fixedly at Nantas, who walked forward. The latter had had the good sense not to yield to any desire to dress himself up; he had simply bought a black coat and a pair of trousers, which were decent but very worn, and gave him the appearance of a poor but careful student, with nothing of the adventurer about him. He stopped in the middle of the room and waited, standing up, but without humility.

‘So it is you, sir,’ stammered the old man.

But he could not continue, for his emotion choked him, and he feared lest he might commit some act of violence. After a pause, he said, simply, ‘You have committed a wicked deed, sir.’

Then when Nantas was about to make some excuse, he repeated more emphatically—‘A wicked deed. I wish to know nothing, I request you to explain nothing to me. In fact no explanation can lessen your crime. Only robbers break in upon families in this way.’

Nantas hung his head again.

‘It is making money very easily, setting a trap in which one is certain of catching both child and father.’

‘Allow me, sir,’ interrupted the young man, stung by these words.

But the baron made a violent gesture.

‘What? Why should I allow anything? It is not for you to speak here. I am telling you what I am in duty bound to tell you, and what you are bound to hear, since you come before me as a culprit. Look at this house. Our family has lived here for more than three centuries

without reproach. Standing here, are you not conscious of our ancient honour and dignity? Well, sir, you have trifled with all that. It nearly killed me; and to-day my hands tremble as if I had suddenly grown ten years older. Be silent and listen to me.'

Nantas had turned very pale. He had taken a difficult part upon himself. He felt anxious to make the blindness of passionate love serve as his pretext.

'I lost my head,' he muttered, trying to make up some tale. 'I could not look at Mademoiselle Flavie——'

At his daughter's name the baron rose and cried in a voice like thunder:

'Silence! I have told you that I do not wish to know anything. Whatever happened matters little to me. I have asked her nothing, and I ask you nothing. Keep your confessions to yourselves, I will have nothing to do with them.'

Then he sat down again, trembling and exhausted. Nantas bent his head, feeling deeply moved, in spite of the command he had over himself. After a pause the old man continued in the dry tone of a person discussing business matters:

'I beg pardon, sir. I had determined to keep cool but failed. You are not at my disposal; I am at yours, since I am in your power. You are here to carry out a transaction which has become necessary. To business, sir.'

And thenceforward he affected to speak like a lawyer, settling as agreeably as possible some shameful case in which he was loath to dabble. He began formally: 'Mademoiselle Flavie Danvilliers inherited at the death of her mother a sum of two hundred thousand francs, which she was not to receive until her marriage. That sum has produced interest; but here are the accounts of my guardianship which I will communicate to you.'

He opened a book and began to read some figures.

Nantas in vain tried to stop him. Emotion seized him in the presence of this old man, who appeared so upright and simple, and who seemed to him so great because he was so calm.

‘Finally,’ the baron concluded, ‘I bestow on you, by an agreement which my notary drew up this morning, another sum of two hundred thousand francs. I know that you have nothing. You can draw those two hundred thousand francs at my banker’s on the day after the marriage.’

‘But I don’t ask for your money, sir,’ said Nantas, ‘I only want your daughter.’

The baron cut him short.

‘You have not the right to refuse,’ he said, ‘and my daughter could not marry a man with less money than herself. I give you the dowry which I intended for her, that is all. Possibly you reckoned on more, for I have the credit of being richer than I really am.’

And as the young man remained mute at this last thrust, the baron put an end to the interview by ringing the bell.

‘Joseph, tell Mademoiselle Flavie that I want her in my room at once.’

He had risen from his chair, and now began to walk slowly about the room. Nantas remained motionless. He was deceiving this old man, and he felt small and powerless before him. At last Flavie appeared.

‘My child,’ said the baron, ‘here is the man. The marriage will take place as soon as possible.’

Then he went out of the room, leaving them alone, as if, so far as he was concerned, the marriage were over.

When the door was shut silence reigned. Nantas and Flavie looked at one another. They had never met before. He thought her very handsome, with her pale and haughty face, and her large grey eyes which never drooped. Perhaps



she had been crying during the three days that she had spent in her room ; however, the coldness of her cheeks must have frozen her tears. She it was who spoke first.

‘ Then the matter is settled, sir,’ she said.

‘ Yes, madame,’ replied Nantas simply.

Her face contracted involuntarily as she cast a long look at him, a look which seemed to be fathoming his baseness.

‘ Well, so much the better,’ she continued. ‘ I was afraid I should not find anyone to agree to such a bargain.’

Nantas could distinguish in her voice all the scorn which she felt for him, but he raised his head. If he had trembled before the father, knowing that he was deceiving him, he determined to be firm with the daughter, who was his accomplice.

‘ Excuse me, madame,’ he said calmly, and with the greatest politeness. ‘ I think you misconceive the position in which what you rightly call the bargain has placed us. I apprehend that, from to-day forth, we are on a footing of perfect equality.’

‘ Indeed ! ’ interrupted Flavie, with a scornful smile.

‘ Yes, perfect equality. You require a name, in order to conceal a fault which I do not presume to condemn, and I give you my name. On my side I require money, and a certain social position, in order to carry out some great enterprises, and you furnish me with that money and position. We thus become two partners whose capitals balance. It only remains for us to express our mutual thanks for the service which we are rendering to one another.’

She smiled no longer ; indeed, a look of irritated pride appeared upon her face. After a pause she asked him, ‘ You know my conditions ? ’

‘ No, madame,’ said Nantas, preserving perfect calmness. ‘ Be good enough to name them. I agree to them in advance.’



Upon this she spoke as follows, without hesitating or blushing : ' Our lives will remain completely distinct and separate. You will give up all rights over me, and I shall owe no duty towards you.'

At each sentence Nantas made an affirmative sign. This was precisely what he desired.

' If I thought it part of my duty to be gallant,' he said, ' I should assert that such conditions would drive me to despair. But we are above empty compliments. I am pleased to see that you have such a correct appreciation of our respective positions. We are not entering upon life by the path of roses. I only ask one thing of you, madame, which is, that you will not make use of the liberty I shall accord you in such a way as to necessitate any interference on my part.'

' What, sir ! ' exclaimed Flavie, violently, her pride revolting.

Nantas bowed respectfully, and entreated her not to be offended. Their position was a delicate one ; they must both of them put up with certain allusions, without which a perfect understanding would be impossible. He refrained from insisting further. Mademoiselle Chuin, in a second interview, had given him further particulars and had named to him a certain Monsieur des Fondettes as the person to whom all the trouble was due.

Suddenly Nantas felt a friendly impulse. Like all those who are conscious of their own power, he was fond of being good-natured.

' Listen, madame,' he exclaimed. ' We don't know one another, but it would be really wrong of us to hate one another at first sight. Perhaps we are made to understand each other. I can see that you despise me, but perhaps that is because you do not know my story.'

Then he began to talk feverishly, throwing himself into a state of excitement as he spoke of his life, his ambition,

and his desperate fruitless efforts in Paris. Then he displayed his scorn of what he called social conventionalism, in which ordinary men became entangled. What mattered the opinion of the world, he asked, when a man had his foot on it? He must show his superiority. Power was an excuse for all. And in glowing terms he painted the sovereign existence which he would make for himself. He feared no further obstacle; nothing prevailed against power. He would be powerful, and therefore he would be happy.

‘Don’t imagine that I am miserably sordid,’ he continued. ‘I am not selling myself for your fortune; I only take your money as a means to rise. Oh, if you only knew what is working within me! if you only knew the burning nights which I have spent, always meditating over the same idea, which was only swept away by the reality of the morrow, then you would understand me! You would then, perhaps, be proud to lean on my arm, saying to yourself that you at least had furnished me with the means to become some one!’

She listened to him in silence, without a single movement of her features. And he asked himself a question which he had been turning over in his mind for three days past, without being able to find answer to it: Had she noticed him at his window, that she had so readily accepted Mademoiselle Chuin’s scheme when the latter had mentioned him? The singular idea occurred to him that perhaps she might have loved him with a romantic love if he had indignantly refused the bargain which the governess had proposed to him.

He stopped at last, and Flavie maintained an icy silence. Then, as if he had not made his confession, she repeated in a dry voice: ‘Then, it is understood, our lives completely distinct, absolute liberty.’

Nantas at once resumed his ceremonious air, and in the

curt voice of a man discussing an agreement, replied : ' It is settled, madame.'

Ill-pleased with himself, he then withdrew. How was it that he had yielded to the foolish desire to overcome that woman ? She was very handsome ; but it was better that there should be nothing in common between them, for she might hamper him in life.

### III

TEN years had passed. One morning Nantas was sitting in the study in which Baron Danvilliers had given him such a formidable reception on the occasion of their first meeting. That study was now his own ; the baron, after being reconciled to his daughter and his son-in-law, had given up the house to them, merely reserving for his own use a little building situated at the other end of the garden and overlooking the Rue de Beaune. In ten years' time Nantas had won for himself one of the highest positions attainable in the financial and mercantile worlds. Having a hand in all the great railway enterprises, engaged in all the land speculations which signalised the earlier period of the Second Empire, he had rapidly accumulated an immense fortune. But his ambition did not halt at that ; he was determined to play a part in politics, and he had succeeded in getting elected as a deputy in a department where he had several farms. Since taking his seat in the Corps Législatif, he had posed as a future Finance Minister. Thanks to his practical knowledge and his ready tongue, he was day by day acquiring a more important position. He was skilful enough to affect absolute devotion to the Empire, but at the same time he professed theories on financial subjects which made a great stir, and which he knew gave the Emperor a deal to think of.

On that particular morning Nantas was overladen with business. The greatest activity prevailed in the spacious offices which he had arranged on the ground-floor of the mansion. There was a crowd of clerks, some sitting motionless at wickets, and others constantly going backwards and forwards, to the sound of banging doors. Bags of gold lay open and overflowing on the tables. There was a constant ring of the precious metal, a tinkling music of wealth such as might have flooded the streets. In the ante-rooms a crowd was surging; place-hunters, financial agents, politicians, all Paris on its knees before power. Great men frequently waited there patiently for an hour at a stretch. And he, sitting at his table, in correspondence with people far and near, able to grasp the world with his outstretched arms, was carrying his former dream of force into fulfilment, conscious that he was the intelligent motor of a colossal machine which moved kingdoms and empires.

Suddenly he rang for his usher. He seemed anxious.

‘Germain,’ he said, ‘do you know whether your mistress has come in?’

And when the man replied that he did not know, he told him to summon his wife’s maid. But Germain did not move.

‘Excuse me, sir,’ he whispered; ‘the President of the Corps Législatif insists on seeing you.’

Nantas made an impatient gesture and replied: ‘Well, show him in, and do as I told you.’

On the previous day, a speech which Nantas had made on an important budgetary question had produced such an impression that the matter had been referred to a commission to be amended according to his views. After the sitting of the Chamber a rumour had spread that the Finance Minister intended to resign, and Nantas was at once spoken of as his probable successor. For his part he



shrugged his shoulders : nothing had been done, he had only had an interview with the Emperor with regard to certain special points. However, the President's visit might have vast significance. At this thought Nantas tried to throw off the feeling of worry which was weighing on him, and rose to grasp the President's hand.

'Ah, Monsieur le Duc,'<sup>1</sup> he said, 'I beg your pardon. I did not know you were here. Believe me, I am deeply sensible of the honour which you are paying me.'

For a minute they talked cordially ; then the President, without saying anything definite, gave him to understand that he had been sent by the Emperor to sound him. Would he accept the Finance portfolio, and what would be his programme ? Upon this, Nantas, with superb calmness, named his conditions. But beneath the impassibility of his face mute triumph was swelling. At last he had mounted the final rung, he was at the top of the ladder. Another step, and he would have all heads save that of the sovereign beneath him. As the President concluded, saying that he was going at once to the Emperor to communicate Nantas's programme, a small door which communicated with the private part of the house opened, and the maid of the financier's wife appeared.

Nantas, suddenly turning pale, stopped short in the middle of a sentence and hurried to the girl, saying to the duke :

'Pray excuse me.'

Then he questioned the servant in whispers. Madame had gone out early ? Had she said where she was going ? When was she expected home ? The maid replied vaguely, like a clever girl who did not wish to compromise herself.

<sup>1</sup> The incidents of the story are supposed to take place during the earlier years of the Second Empire, when the Duke de Morny (the illegitimate half-brother of Napoleon III.) was President of the Corps Législatif.—*Ed.*



Understanding the absurdity of the situation, Nantas concluded by remarking, 'Tell your mistress as soon as she comes in that I wish to speak to her.'

The President of the Chamber, somewhat surprised, had stepped up to a window and was looking into the courtyard. Nantas now returned to him, again apologising. But he had lost his self-possession, he stammered, and astonished the duke by his clumsy remarks.

'There, I've spoilt the whole business,' he exclaimed aloud, when the other had gone. 'I've missed the portfolio.'

He sat down, feeling disgusted and angry. Several more visitors were then shown in. An engineer had a report to present to him, showing that enormous profits would arise from the working of a certain mine. A diplomatist interviewed him on the subject of a loan which a foreign Power wanted to negotiate in Paris. His tools flocked in, rendering account of twenty different schemes. Finally he received a large number of his colleagues of the Chamber, all of whom went into raptures about his speech of the day before.

Leaning back in his chair, he accepted all this flattery without a smile. The clink of gold was still audible in the neighbouring rooms; the house seemed to tremble like a factory, as if all that money were manufactured there. He had only to take up a pen to despatch telegrams which would have spread joy or consternation through the markets of Europe; he could prevent or precipitate war, by supporting or opposing the loan of which he had been told; he even held the fate of the French Budget in his hands, and he would soon know whether it would be best for him to support or oppose the Empire. This was his triumph, his formidable personality had become the axis upon which a world was turning. And yet he did not enjoy his triumph, as he had thought he would. He experienced a feeling of listlessness, his mind was elsewhere,

on the alert at the slightest audible sound. Scarcely had a flame, a flush of satisfied ambition, risen to his cheeks than he felt himself turn pale again as if a cold hand from behind had been laid upon his neck.

Two hours had passed and Flavie had not yet appeared. Nantas at last called Germain, and gave him orders to summon Baron Danvilliers if the old gentleman were at home. Then he began to pace his study, refusing to see anyone else that day. Little by little his agitation had increased. His wife had evidently been to keep some appointment. She must have renewed her acquaintance with Monsieur des Fondettes. The latter's wife had died six months previously. True, Nantas disclaimed any idea of being jealous; during ten years he had strictly observed the agreement to which he had been a party; but he drew the line, as he said, at being made a dupe of. Never would he allow his wife to compromise his position by making him a laughing-stock. His strength forsook him as he became a prey to the feelings of a husband who requires respect. He experienced agony such as he had never endured, not even in his most hazardous speculations, at the commencement of his career.

At last Flavie entered the room, still in her outdoor costume; she had merely taken off her gloves and hat. Nantas, whose voice trembled, told her that he would have gone to her if he had known that she had come in. But, without sitting down, she motioned to him to have done quickly.

'Madame,' he began, 'an explanation has become necessary between us. Where were you this morning?'

Her husband's quivering voice and the pointedness of his question, astonished her profoundly.

'Where it pleased me to go,' she replied in a cold tone.

'That is exactly what, in future, I must object to,' he resumed, turning very pale. 'It is your duty to recollect

what I said to you : I will not allow you to make use of the liberty I grant you, in a way which may bring disgrace upon my name.'

Flavie smiled in sovereign disdain.

'Disgrace your name, sir? but that is a question which regards yourself. It is a thing which no longer remains to be done.'

Upon this, Nantas, wild with passion, advanced, as if to strike her.

'You wretched creature!' he stammered, 'you have just left Monsieur des Fondettes. You have a lover, I know it!'

'You are wrong,' she replied, without recoiling; 'I have never seen Monsieur des Fondettes again. But even if I had a lover, it would not be for you to reproach me. What difference would it make to you? You forget our compact.'

He looked at her for a moment with wild eyes; then, choking with sobs, and throwing into one cry all the passion which he had so long stifled, he flung himself at her feet.

'Oh, Flavie, I love you!'

Unbending still, she drew back, for he had touched the hem of her dress. But the wretched man followed her, dragging himself upon his knees with his hands uplifted.

'I love you, Flavie, I love you to madness! How it happened I know not. It began years ago, and it grew and grew, till now it has absorbed my whole being. Oh! I have struggled. I thought this passion unworthy of me. I called our first interview to mind. But now I suffer too much. I must speak——'

For a long time he continued thus. It was the shattering of all his principles. This man, who had put his trust in force, who maintained that volition was the sole lever capable of moving the world, was crushed, feeble

like a child, disarmed by a woman. And his dream of fortune realised, his present high position, he would have given all for that woman to have raised him by a kiss upon his brow! She marred his triumph. He no longer heard the gold which sounded in his office; he no longer thought of the endless procession of flatterers who came to bow their knees to him; he forgot that the Emperor, at that moment, perhaps, was summoning him to power. All those things had no existence for him. He possessed everything, save the only thing he wished for—his wife's love. And if she denied it, then he had nothing left him!

'Listen,' he continued; 'whatever I have done, I have done for you. At first, it is true, you were for nothing in it; I simply worked to gratify my own pride. But soon you became the one object of all my thoughts, of all my efforts. I told myself that I must mount as high as possible, in order to become worthy of you. I hoped to make you unbend on the day when I should lay my power at your feet. See what I now am. Have I not won your forgiveness? Do not despise me any longer, I entreat you.'

As yet she had not spoken. Now, however, she said calmly: 'Get up, sir. Somebody might come in.'

He refused, and still went on entreating. Perhaps he would have bided his time if he had not been jealous of Monsieur des Fondettes. It was that torture which maddened him. At last he became very humble.

'I see that you still despise me. Very well, wait, do not bestow your love on anybody. I can promise you so much that I shall know how to move you. You must forgive me if I was harsh just now. I am out of my senses. Oh, let me hope that you will love me some day!'

'Never!' she answered energetically.

Then, as he still remained upon the floor seemingly



crushed, she would have left the room ; but suddenly, beside himself with fury, he sprang up and caught her by the wrists. A woman braved him thus when the world was at his feet ! He was capable of anything, could overthrow States, rule France as he pleased, and yet he could not obtain his wife's love ! He, so strong, so powerful, he whose slightest desires were orders, he had but one longing now, and that longing would never be gratified, because a creature, who was as weak as a child, spurned him ! He grasped her arms, and repeated in a hoarse whisper : ' You must, you must——'

' And I will not,' replied Flavie, pale and obstinate.

The struggle was still going on when Baron Danvilliers opened the door. On seeing him, Nantas released Flavie, and cried :

' Your daughter has just come from her lover, sir ! Tell her that a woman should respect her husband's name, even if she does not love him, even if the thought of her own honour does not stand in the way.'

The baron, who was greatly aged, remained standing on the threshold, gazing at this violent scene. It was a melancholy surprise for him. He had believed them to be united, and he looked with approval on their ceremonious intercourse in public, considering that to be a mere matter of form. His son-in-law and he belonged to different generations ; but although he disliked the financier's somewhat unscrupulous activity, although he condemned certain undertakings which he regarded as undesirable, he was forced to recognise Nantas's strength of will and his quick intellect. And now he suddenly came upon this drama, which he had never even suspected.

When Nantas accused Flavie of having a lover, the baron, who still treated his married daughter with the same severity as he had shown her when a child, advanced with a stately step.



'I swear to you that she has just come from her lover's,' repeated Nantas; 'and, look at her, she defies me.'

Flavie turned away her head disdainfully. She was arranging her cuffs, which her husband had crushed in his roughness. Not a blush was to be seen on her face. Her father spoke to her.

'My child,' said he, 'why do you not defend yourself? Can your husband be speaking the truth? Can you have reserved this last grief for my old age? The offence would fall on me as well; for the fault of one member of a family falls upon the others.'

Flavie made a gesture of impatience. Her father had well chosen his time to accuse her! For a moment longer she bore his questions, wishing to spare him the shame of an explanation. But as he in his turn lost patience, seeing her mute and obstinate, she finally replied, 'Father, let this man play his part. You do not know him. For your own sake do not force me to speak out.'

'He is your husband,' said the old man, 'the father of your child.'

Flavie started, stung to the quick. 'No, no, he is not the father of my child. I will tell you everything now. This man was never my lover, for it would be at least some excuse for him if he had loved me. This man simply sold himself and agreed to hide another's sin.'

The baron turned towards Nantas, who had recoiled, deadly pale.

'Do you hear me, father?' continued Flavie, more violently. 'He sold himself, sold himself for money! I have never loved him, and he has never been anything to me. I wished to spare you a great sorrow. I bought him so that he might lie to you. Look at him now. See whether I am not telling you the truth.'

Nantas hid his face in his hands.

'And now,' resumed the young woman, 'he actually

wants me to love him. He went down on his knees just now and wept. Some comedy, no doubt! Forgive me for having deceived you, father; but how can I love such a man? Now that you know all, take me away. Indeed, he treated me with violence just now, and I will not remain here a moment longer.'

The baron straightened his bent figure. In silence he stepped forward and gave his arm to his daughter. The two crossed the room, without Nantas making a movement to detain them. Then, upon reaching the door, the old man spoke these two words: 'Farewell, sir.'

The door closed. Nantas remained alone, crushed, gazing wildly into the void around him. Germain came in and placed a letter on the table; Nantas opened it mechanically, and cast his eyes over it. This letter, written by the Emperor in person, gave him the appointment of Finance Minister, and was couched in the most flattering terms. He could hardly understand it; the realisation of all his ambition did not affect him in the least.

Meanwhile, in the neighbouring rooms the rattle of money had grown louder; it was the busiest hour of the day, the hour when Nantas's house seemed to shake the world. And he, amid that colossal machinery which was his work, he, at the apogee of his power, with his eyes stupidly fixed on the Emperor's letter, gave vent to a childish complaint, the negation of his whole life: 'Ah! how unhappy I am! how unhappy I am!'

Then, resting his head upon the table, he wept, and the hot tears that gushed forth from his eyes blotted the letter which appointed him Minister of Finance.

## IV

DURING the whole of the eighteen months that Nantas had been a Minister, he had been trying to drown the past by superhuman toil. On the day after the scene in his study he had had an interview with Baron Danvilliers; and Flavie, acting on her father's advice, had consented to return to her husband's roof. But they spoke no word together, except when they were forced to play a comedy in the eyes of the world. Nantas had determined not to leave his home. In the evening his secretaries came to him from the Ministry, and he got through all his work in his own study.

It was at this period of his life that he performed his greatest deeds. A secret voice suggested lofty and fruitful aspirations to him. Whenever he passed by, a murmur of sympathy and admiration was heard. But he remained insensible to eulogy. It may be said that he worked without hope of reward, with the sole idea of performing prodigies, of which the only aim was to compass the impossible. At each step on his upward career he consulted Flavie's face. Was she touched at last? Did she pardon him his former baseness? Had she still any thought save of the development of his intellect? But never did he detect any emotion on that woman's mute countenance, and he said to himself, as he redoubled his efforts: 'I am not high enough for her yet; I must climb, still climb.'

He was determined to compel happiness, as he had compelled fortune. All his old belief in his power returned, he would not admit that there was any other lever in this world; it was will which produced humanity. When discouragement seized on him at times, he shut himself up, so that nobody should witness the weakness of his

flesh. His struggles could only be read in his deep-set, dark-circled eyes, in which an ardent fire blazed.

He was devoured by jealousy now. To fail to win Flavie's love was a torture; but the thought that she might care for another drove him mad. By way of asserting her liberty, it was quite possible that she might intrigue with Monsieur des Fondettes. Her husband affected not to occupy himself with her, but all the time he endured agony whenever she absented herself, even if it were only for an hour. If he had not feared to make himself look ridiculous, he would have followed her in the streets. That course displeasing him, he determined to have some one beside her whose devotion he could purchase.

Mademoiselle Chuin had remained an inmate of the house. The baron was used to her, not to mention that she knew too many things to make it advisable to get rid of her. At one time the old maid had resolved to retire on the twenty thousand francs that Nantas had paid her on the day after his marriage. But she had no doubt calculated that there would be further pickings in such a household. So she awaited her opportunity, having found, moreover, that she needed yet another twenty thousand francs to buy the long-desired notary's house at Roinville, the little market town she came from.

There was no occasion for Nantas to mince matters with this old lady, whose pious mien no longer deceived him. However, on the morning when he called her into his study and openly proposed to her that she should keep him informed as to his wife's slightest actions, she professed to be insulted, and asked him what he took her for.

'Come,' said he impatiently, 'I'm very busy, some one is waiting for me; let us be brief, please.'

But she would listen to nothing which was not couched



in proper terms. One of her principles was, that things are not ugly in themselves, that they only become ugly or cease to be so according to the way in which they are presented.

‘Very well,’ said Nantas, ‘a good action is involved in this. I am fearful that my wife is hiding some sorrow from me. For the last few weeks I have observed that she has been very much depressed, and I thought that you could find out the cause of it.’

‘You can rely on me,’ said Mademoiselle Chuin, with a maternal outburst on hearing these words. ‘I am devoted to your wife, I will do anything for her sake or yours. From to-morrow we will keep a watch on her.’

Nantas promised to reward the old maid for her services. She pretended to be angry at first, but she had the adroitness to make him fix a sum, and it was agreed that he should give her ten thousand francs upon her furnishing him with positive proof of his wife’s conduct whatever it might be. Little by little they had come to call things by their proper names.

From that time forward Nantas was less uneasy. Three months passed and he was engaged upon a great task—the preparation of the Budget. With the Emperor’s sanction he had introduced some important modifications into the financial system. He knew that he would be fiercely attacked in the Chamber, and he had to prepare a large quantity of documents. Frequently he sat up all night, and this hard work deadened him as it were to emotion, and made him patient. Whenever he saw Mademoiselle Chuin he questioned her briefly. Did she know anything? Had his wife paid many visits? Had she stopped long at certain houses? Mademoiselle Chuin kept a journal of the slightest incidents, but so far she had not succeeded in making any important discovery. Nantas felt reassured, whilst the old woman occasionally blinked



her eyes, saying that she should perhaps have some news for him soon.

The truth was that Mademoiselle Chuin had indulged in further reflection. Ten thousand francs was not enough; she needed twenty thousand to purchase the notary's house. She at first thought of selling herself to the wife, after having sold herself to the husband. But she knew Flavie, and she was fearful of being dismissed at the first word. For a long time past, before she had even been charged with this matter, she had kept watch over Madame Nantas on her own account, remarking to herself that a servant's profits lie in the master's or mistress's vices. However, she had discovered that she had to deal with a virtue which was all the more rigid since it was based upon pride. One effect of Flavie's stumble had been that it had inspired her with positive hatred for the other sex. So Mademoiselle Chuin was in despair, when one day she met Monsieur des Fondettes in the street, and after they had had some conversation together, realising that he desired to be reconciled to her mistress, she made up her mind: she would serve both him and Nantas—a combination worthy of genius.

Everything favoured her. Monsieur des Fondettes had met Flavie in society and had been scorned by her. He was in despair thereat. At the end of a week's time, after a great parade of feeling on his side and of scruples on that of Mademoiselle Chuin, the matter was settled; he was to give her ten thousand francs, and she was to smuggle him into the house one evening so that he might have a private interview with Flavie.

The arrangement having been effected, Mademoiselle Chuin sought Nantas.

‘What have you learnt?’ he asked, turning pale.

She would not say anything definite at first. But Nantas displayed such furious impatience that before long

she told him that Monsieur des Fondettes had an appointment with Flavie that evening in her private apartments.

‘Very good—thank you,’ stammered Nantas. And he sent her off with a wave of the hand; he was afraid of giving way before her.

This abrupt dismissal astonished and delighted the old woman, for she had prepared herself for a long cross-examination, and had even pre-arranged her answers, so that she might not contradict herself. She made a bow, and then retired, putting on a mournful face.

Nantas had risen. As soon as he was alone he said aloud:

‘This evening, in her private apartments.’

Then he carried his hands to his head, as if he feared it would burst. That appointment under his own roof seemed to him monstrous audacity. He clenched his fists, and his rage made him think of murder. And yet he had his task to finish—those budgetary documents to complete. Three times did he sit down at his table, and three times a heaving of his whole body raised him to his feet again; whilst, behind him, something seemed to be urging him to go at once to his wife, and denounce her. At last, however, he conquered himself, and resumed his work, swearing that he would strangle them both that very evening. It was the greatest victory that he had ever won over his feelings.

That same afternoon Nantas went to submit to the Emperor the definite plan of the Budget. The sovereign having raised certain objections, he discussed them with perfect clearness. But it became necessary that he should modify an important part of his programme—a difficult matter, as the debate was to take place on the next day.

‘I will pass the night over it,’ he said.

And on his way home he thought, ‘I’ll kill them at

midnight, and I shall have the whole night afterwards to finish this task.'

At dinner that evening Baron Danvilliers began talking about the Budget, which was making some little stir. He did not approve of all his son-in-law's views on financial matters, but he admitted that they were very broad and very remarkable. Whilst Nantas was replying to the Baron, he fancied, on several occasions, that he noticed his wife's eyes fixed upon him. She frequently looked at him in that way now. Her glance was not softened, however; she simply listened, and seemed to be trying to read his thoughts. Nantas fancied that she feared she was betrayed. Accordingly he made an effort to appear careless; he talked a good deal, affected great animation, and finally overcame the objections of his father-in-law, who gave way to his great intellect. Flavie was still looking at him, and suddenly a hardly perceptible glimpse of tenderness darted across her face.

Nantas worked in his study until midnight. Little by little he had become absorbed in his task, and soon he lost consciousness of everything save that creation of his brain, that great financial scheme which he had painfully built up piece by piece, in the midst of innumerable obstacles. When the clock struck twelve he instinctively raised his head. Deep silence reigned in the house. Suddenly he recollected everything. But it was a trial for him to leave his chair; he laid his pen down regretfully, and at last took a few steps as if in obedience to a will which had forsaken him. Then his face flushed, and a flame blazed forth in his eyes. He started for his wife's rooms.

That evening Flavie had dismissed her maid early, saying that she wished to be alone. She had a suite of rooms for her own use. Until midnight she remained in a little boudoir, where, stretched upon a sofa, she took up

a book and began to read. But again and again the book fell from her hands, and, closing her eyes at last, she became absorbed in thought. Her face still wore a softened expression, and a faint smile played upon it at intervals. Suddenly she started up. There was a knock outside.

‘Who is there?’ she asked.

‘Open the door,’ replied Nantas.

She was so surprised that she opened it mechanically. Never before had her husband presented himself in this way. He entered the room half-distracted; his rage had mastered him while he ascended the stairs. Mademoiselle Chuin, who was watching for him on the landing, had just told him that Monsieur des Fondettes had been there for some hours. Accordingly he was determined to show his wife no mercy.

‘There is a man concealed in your rooms,’ said he.

Flavie did not reply at first, so greatly did these words surprise her. At last she grasped their meaning.

‘You are mad, sir!’ she answered.

But, without stopping to argue, he was already looking about him. Then he made his way to the next room. With one bound, however, she threw herself before the door, crying: ‘You shall not go in. These are my rooms, and you have no right here.’

Quivering with passion and looking taller in her pride, she guarded the door. For a moment they stood thus motionless, speechless, gazing into one another’s eyes. Nantas with his head thrust forward, his arms opened, seemed about to throw himself upon her to force a passage.

‘Come away,’ he said, in a hoarse whisper. ‘I’m stronger than you, and go in I will!’

‘You shall not; I will not permit it.’

And as Nantas kept on repeating accusations, she, without even deigning to deny them, shrugged her shoulders,



and replied, 'Even if it were true what difference can it make to you? Am I not free?'

He recoiled at these words, which struck him like a blow. It was quite true, she was free. A cold shudder ran through him, he plainly realised that she had the best of the argument, and that he was playing the part of a feeble and illogical child. He was not observing their compact; his foolish passion had made it hateful to him. Why had he not remained at work in his study? The blood fled from his cheeks, and an indefinable expression of suffering overspread his face. When Flavie saw his pitiable condition she left the door before which she had been standing, whilst a tender gleam came into her eyes. 'Look,' she said, simply.

And then she passed into the adjoining room herself carrying a lamp in her hand, whilst Nantas remained standing at the door. He had made her a sign as if to say that it was sufficient, that he did not wish to enter. But it was she who insisted now. When she had drawn aside the curtains, and perceived Monsieur des Fondettes who had been concealed behind them, so intense was her amazement and horror that she shrieked.

'It was true,' she stammered, 'it was true this man was here; but I did not know it. On my life I swear it!'

Then, with an effort, she calmed herself, and even seemed to regret the impulse which had prompted her to defend herself.

'You were right, sir, and I crave your pardon,' she said to Nantas, endeavouring to speak in her usual tone of voice.

Monsieur des Fondettes, however, felt somewhat foolish, and would have given a good deal if the husband had only flown into a passion. But Nantas remained silent. He had simply turned very pale. When he had carried his



eyes from Monsieur des Fondettes to Flavie, he bowed to the latter, merely saying :

‘ Excuse me, madame, you are free.’

Then he turned and walked away. Something seemed to have broken within him ; merely a machinery of muscle and bone still worked. When he reached his study again he walked straight to a drawer where he kept a revolver. Having examined the weapon, he said aloud, as if making a formal engagement with himself : ‘ That suffices ; I will kill myself presently.’

He turned up his lamp, sat down at his table, and quietly resumed his work. Amid the deep silence he completed, without an instant’s hesitation, a sentence that he had previously left unfinished. One by one were fresh sheets of paper covered with writing and set in a heap. Two hours later, when Flavie, who had driven Monsieur des Fondettes from the house, came down with bare feet to listen at the door, she only heard her husband’s pen scratching as it travelled over the paper. She bent down and applied her eye to the keyhole. Nantas was still calmly writing, his face was expressive of peace and satisfaction at his work ; but a ray of the lamp fell upon the barrel of the revolver at his side.

## V

THE house adjoining the garden of the mansion was now the property of Nantas, who had bought it from his father-in-law. By a personal caprice he had refrained from letting the wretched garret where he had struggled against want for two months after his arrival in Paris. Since he had acquired an enormous fortune he had on more than one occasion felt impelled to go and shut himself up in that little room for hours at a time. It was there that he had

suffered, and it was there that he liked to enjoy his triumph. Again, whenever he met with any obstacle he was wont to go there to reflect and to form great resolutions. Once there he again became what he had formerly been. And now, when the hand of death hovered over him, it was in that attic that he determined to meet it.

He did not finish his work until eight o'clock in the morning. Fearing that fatigue might overcome him, he took a cold bath. Then he summoned several of his clerks for the purpose of giving them instructions. When his secretary arrived he had an interview with him, and the secretary received orders to take the plan of the Budget to the Tuileries, and to furnish certain explanations if the Emperor should raise any fresh objections. That settled, Nantas considered that he had done enough. He had left everything in order; he was not going off like a demented bankrupt. After all, he was his own property; he could dispose of himself without being accused of selfishness or cowardice.

Nine o'clock struck. The time had come. But, just as he was leaving his study, taking the revolver with him, he had to put up with a final humiliation. Mademoiselle Chuin presented herself, to claim the ten thousand francs which he had promised her. He paid her, and was forced to put up with her familiarity. She assumed a maternal air, and seemed to treat him as a successful pupil. Even if he had had any hesitation left, this shameful complicity would have confirmed him in his intentions. He sought the garret quickly, and in his haste he left the door unlocked.

Nothing was changed there. There were the same rents in the wall-paper; the bed, the table, and the chair were still there, with their same old look of poverty. For a moment he inhaled the atmosphere which reminded him of his former struggles. Then he approached the window and caught sight of the same stretch of Paris as formerly;

the trees in the garden, the Seine, the quays, and a part of the right bank of the river, where the houses rose up in confused masses until they were lost to sight at the point where the Père-Lachaise Cemetery appeared in the far distance.

The revolver was lying within his reach on the rickety table. There was no hurry now; he felt certain that nobody would disturb him, and that he might kill himself whenever he pleased. He became absorbed in thought, and he reflected that he was at precisely the same point as formerly—led back to the same spot, with the same intention of suicide. One evening before, in that very room, he had determined to dash his brains out. In those days he had been too poor to purchase a pistol; he had only had the stones in the streets at his disposal, but death was awaiting him now as then. Thus in this world death is the only thing which never fails, which is always sure and always ready. Nothing that he knew of was like death; he sought in vain, all else had given way beneath him: death alone remained a certainty. He regretted that he had lived ten years too long. The experience that he had acquired of life, in his ascent to fortune and power, seemed to him puerile. Why had he put himself to that expenditure of will, what purpose had been served by that waste of force, since will and force were as nothing? One passion had sufficed to destroy him: he had foolishly allowed himself to love Flavie, and now the edifice which he had built up was cracking, collapsing like a mere house of cards swept away by the breath of a child. It was lamentable—it resembled the punishment that overtakes a marauding schoolboy, under whom a branch snaps, and who perishes on the spot where he has sinned. Life was a mistake; the best men ended it as tamely as the biggest fools.

Nantas had taken the revolver from the table, and

slowly raised it. At that supreme moment one last regret made him hesitate for a second. What great things would he not have accomplished if Flavie had understood him! Had she but thrown herself on his neck one day, saying, 'I love you!' he would have found a lever to move the world! And his last thought was one of disdain for force and strength; since they which were to have given him everything had not been able to give him Flavie.

He raised the revolver. The morning was a glorious one. Through the open window the sun poured in, lending even a look of brightness to that wretched garret. In the distance, Paris was awakening to its giant life. Nantas pressed the weapon to his temple.

But the door was suddenly flung open, and Flavie entered. With one movement she dashed the revolver aside, and the bullet lodged itself in the ceiling. They looked at one another. She was so out of breath, so choked with emotion, that she could not articulate. At last, embracing Nantas for the first time, she spoke the words for which he longed, the only words which could have determined him to live.

'I love you!' she cried, sobbing on his breast, and tearing the avowal from her pride, her mastered being. 'I love you, for you are truly strong.'

# THE SPREE AT COQUEVILLE

## I

COQUEVILLE is a little village situated in a cleft of the rocks, a couple of leagues from Grandport, with a fine sandy beach, stretching out before the hovels which cling half-way up the side of the cliff, like shells left there by the tide. When one climbs the heights of Grandport on the left, one can see westward, plainly enough, the smooth yellow sands which suggest a stream of gold dust pouring from the cloven rocks; and anyone with good eyes can even distinguish the reddish-coloured houses whose smoke ascends in bluish coils to the summit of the huge cliff, barring the sky.

It is a lonely spot, and the inhabitants have never reached the number of two hundred. The ravine which opens on to the sands, and on the threshold of which the village is perched, winds through the country with such sudden bends and such steep slopes, that it is almost impossible to pass through it except on foot. This cuts off most communication and isolates the little village, which might be a hundred miles from the neighbouring hamlets. Thus the only intercourse of the inhabitants with Grandport is by water. Nearly all are fishermen, gaining their livelihood from the sea, and each



day they convey their fish to Grandport in their boats. A big firm—that of Dufeu & Co.—buys of them by the catch. Old Dufeu has been dead some years, but his widow carries on the business with the help of an assistant, M. Mouchel, a tall fair fellow, whose duty it is to scour the coast and make arrangements with the fishermen. This M. Mouchel is the one link between Coqueville and the civilised world.

Coqueville deserves a historian. It seems certain that some time during the dark ages the village was founded by the Mahés, a family who established themselves and multiplied exceedingly at the foot of the cliff. They must originally have been prosperous and have married among themselves, as for centuries there is no mention of anyone besides the Mahés in the place. Then, during the reign of Louis XIII., a man named Floche appeared upon the scene. It is not exactly known whence he came, but he married a Mahé girl, and from that moment a phenomenon was witnessed—the Floches prospered in their turn, and multiplied to such an extent that they gradually absorbed the Mahés, whose number diminished, and whose fortune passed into the hands of the new-comers. No doubt the Floches had the advantage of possessing fresher blood, more vigorous physiques, and temperaments which were better adapted to the inclemency of wind and waves. At any rate, the Floches are nowadays the masters of Coqueville.

It can be understood that this displacement of position and wealth was not accomplished without many terrible struggles. The Mahés and the Floches detest one another. Theirs is a century old hatred. In spite of their fall, the Mahés are still proud of having been the first conquerors, rulers, and ancestors of the place, and they speak in terms of contempt of the first Floche as a beggar, a vagrant whom they had taken in and sheltered from pity, and to

whom, to their eternal regret, they had given one of their daughters. According to them, the descendants of this Floche have never been anything but libertines and thieves; and with the bitter rage of ruined, fallen nobles who see the swarming progeny of *bourgeois* lording it over their *châteaux* and lands, there is no insult that the Mahés do not heap upon the powerful tribe of Floche.

Naturally, the Floches, on their side, are insolently triumphant. They enjoy life, and this gives them a jeering disposition. They jeer at the ancient race of Mahé, and swear that they will drive the others from the village if they do not bow to their rule. In their eyes the older family are starvelings, who would do far better to mend their rags rather than proudly drape them round their shoulders; and thus Coqueville is divided into two ferocious factions—that is to say, about a hundred and thirty of the inhabitants are quite determined to demolish the other fifty, simply because they are the stronger. A struggle between two empires is carried on upon exactly the same lines.

Amongst the most recent quarrels which have shaken Coqueville, people quote the famous enmity between the two brothers, Fouasse and Tupain, and the uproarious battles of the Rouget household. It must be stated that each inhabitant formerly received a nickname, which, with time, has become a real family surname, for it was difficult to find one's way amidst the labyrinth of marriages between the Mahés and the Floches. Rouget ('Carrots') certainly had an ancestor of ruddy hair and complexion, but one cannot account for such names as Fouasse and Tupain, many cognomens having lost all sense and significance as time passed on.

Now, old Françoise, a jolly old woman of eighty, still living, had had Fouasse by a Mahé, then, her husband dying, she had taken a Floche as her second partner, and

had given birth to Tupain. Thence came the hatred between the two brothers, which was all the more lively on account of a dispute about some inheritance. The Rougets, too, were always fighting, because Rouget accused Marie, his wife, of partiality for a Floche, big Brisemotte, a dark sturdy fellow upon whom he, Rouget (a little nervous and very quarrelsome man), had already twice dashed, knife in hand, swearing that he would cut his heart out.

However Coqueville's chief concern was neither Rouget's fits of passion nor the disputes between Tupain and Fouasse. There was a much more important rumour about, viz., that Delphin, a young fellow of twenty, and a Mahé, had dared to fall in love with the beautiful Margot, the daughter of La Queue, who was the richest of the Floches, and mayor of the village. He was called La Queue (Pig-tail), because his father had, in Louis Philippe's time, been the last to wear his hair plaited, with the obstinate determination of an old man who clung to the fashions of his youth.

Now, La Queue owned one of the two biggest fishing-boats in Coqueville, the *Zephyr*, which was by far the best of all the smacks, and still new and in perfect order. The other large boat, the *Whale*, a leaking pinnace, belonged to Rouget, and was manned by Delphin and Fouasse; while La Queue took with him Tupain and Brisemotte. The latter was never tired of laughing contemptuously at the *Whale*, an old tub, so they said, which would some day disappear beneath the waves like a handful of mud. So when La Queue learnt that that vagabond Delphin, belonging to the *Whale*, was daring to hang about his daughter Margot, he gave the girl two sounding smacks, simply to warn her that she should never be the wife of a Mahé.

Margot, in a furious rage, vowed that she would pass the blows to Delphin if he ever came near her, for it was

indeed aggravating to be clouted on account of a fellow she never even looked at. Margot, who at sixteen was as strong as a man and as handsome as a real lady, was said to be very hard on anyone who made love to her, and to hold sweethearts in contempt. So one can understand the amount of gossip that went on in Coqueville about Delphin's audacity, Margot's anger, and the two smacks that she had received.

Still, there were some who said that Margot, in her heart, was not really so very angry at seeing Delphin come after her. He was a short, fair fellow, with a sea-tanned skin, and thick curly hair which strayed over his eyes and down his neck. And he was very strong, too, in spite of his slender figure—quite capable, indeed, of beating a man three times his size. It was said that sometimes he went off to have a spree at Grandport, and this gave him a somewhat alarming reputation among the girls, who accused him, between themselves, of leading a fast life—a vague expression which denoted any and every unknown pleasure.

Whenever Margot spoke of Delphin she waxed too wrathful; but he always smiled knowingly, and gazed at her calmly with his small, bright eyes, never troubling in the least either about her contempt or her anger. He walked up and down before her house, and stealthily followed her under cover of brambles and thickets, watching her for hours with the patience and the cunning of a cat after a tom-tit. Whenever she suddenly found him behind her, so close that the warmth of his breath suffered to betray him, he did not take to his heels, but put on a gentle, sorrowful air, which took Margot by surprise, and made her forget her anger until he was already a long way off. If her father had seen her he would certainly have hit her again. Such a state of affairs could not last, and yet Margot seemed to have sworn to no purpose that Delphin



should one day have the smacks she had promised him, for she never seized the opportunity of bestowing them on him when he was there; in such wise that people said she should not talk so much about doing it, since she still kept the clouts for herself.

No one, however, ever dreamt that she could possibly become Delphin's wife. Her behaviour was simply regarded as the weakness of a born coquette, for a marriage between the most beggarly of all the Mahés—a fellow who had not six shirts to his back—and the mayor's daughter, the heiress of the richest of all the Floches, seemed simply monstrous and absurd. Ill-disposed people said that she might keep company with him, but would certainly never marry him. In short, all Coqueville was interested in the affair, and felt anxious to know how things would end. Would Delphin have his ears boxed? Or would Margot allow herself to be kissed in some quiet corner among the rocks? That was what time alone would prove, but pending the result Coqueville was in a state of revolution, some being for the clouts and others for the kisses.

Two people only, in the village, belonged neither to the Mahés nor the Floches, and those were the priest and the rural constable. The latter—a tall, thin man, whose real name nobody seemed to know, but who was called the Emperor, probably because he had served under Charles X.—did not in reality exercise the slightest surveillance over the parish, whose land consisted chiefly of bare rocks and barren heath. A sub-prefect, who befriended him, had created this sinecure for his benefit, in order that he might live in peace on a microscopical salary. As for Abbé Radiguet, he was one of those simple-minded priests whom the bishops are only too glad to get rid of by burying them in some far-away village. He lived the life of an honest peasant, tilling the small garden he had managed to form on the rock, and smoking his pipe as he watched



the growth of his vegetables. His only fault was his partiality for good cheer which he did not know how to satisfy, reduced as he was to worship mackerel and to drink cider in far larger quantities at times than was good for him. Still, he was a father to his parishioners, and every now and then they came to hear mass just by way of pleasing him.

However, the priest and the constable, after long succeeding in remaining neutral, were in the end forced to take sides in the village. And now the Emperor stood up for the Mahés, while Abbé Radiguet lent his support to the Floches, whence arose various complications. As the Emperor had nothing to do from morning till night, and grew tired of counting the boats coming out of Grandport harbour, he constituted himself the village detective. Since becoming a partisan of the Mahés, he upheld Fouasse against Tupain, tried to catch Rouget's wife flirting with Brisemotte, and, above all else, closed his eyes whenever he saw Delphin slip into the courtyard of Margot's house.

The worst of all this was that it led to violent quarrels between the Emperor and his natural superior, Mayor La Queue. In his respect for discipline, the former duly listened to the latter's reprimands, but then went and did exactly as he pleased, thus disorganising public authority in Coqueville. It was impossible to pass before the barn, which by courtesy was termed the municipal building, without being half-deafened by the noise of a dispute. Abbé Radiguet, on the other hand, now that he had reinforced the ranks of the triumphant Floches (who showered superb mackerel upon him), stealthily encouraged Rouget's wife in the resistance she offered to her husband, and threatened Margot with flames should she ever dare allow Delphin to touch her with the tip of his finger. It was simply utter anarchy—the army in revolt against civil

authority, religion winking at the misdeeds of the *bourgeoisie*, and a whole nation, numbering a hundred and eighty souls, ready to devour one another in a mouse-hole, situated between the immense sea and the infinite vastness of the sky.

Delphin was the only one who still smiled amiably in the midst of the general agitation of Coqueville, for he was in love and only cared about winning Margot. He laid snares for her much as if he had been trying to catch a rabbit, and he aimed at getting the priest to marry them.

One evening Margot found him watching for her in a lane, and then at last she raised her hand to strike. But she suddenly turned very red, for, without waiting for the blow to fall, Delphin had caught hold of the hand which threatened him, and was passionately kissing it.

She began to tremble, while he whispered to her :

‘I love you. Will you have me?’

‘Never!’ she cried, in revolt at the idea.

Delphin shrugged his shoulders, then went on in a quiet tender voice : ‘Don’t say that. We suit each other very well, and you’d see how nice it would be.’

## II

THAT Sunday was a terrible day. One of those sudden September storms, which set such awful tempests raging round the rocky coast of Grandport, had arisen ; and, as the light began to fade, a ship in distress was espied from Coqueville. But the darkness increased and it was not possible to attempt to render any aid. The *Zephyr* and the *Whale* had been anchored since the previous evening in a little natural harbour lying between two granite walls to the left of the beach ; neither La Queue nor

Rouget daring to go out in such weather, which was the more to be regretted, as M. Mouchel, Madame Dufeu's representative, had taken the trouble to come in person on the Saturday, to offer them particularly good terms if they would make every effort, for the catches had not been very good lately, and the markets were complaining.

So Coqueville muttered and grumbled as it went to bed that Sunday evening, amidst the torrents of rain pouring down around it. It was the old, old tale; whenever fish was not to be got from the sea, orders came in. And between its grumblings, the village talked of the ship which had been seen driving before the hurricane, and which, now, must certainly be lying at the bottom of the sea.

On the following day, Monday, the sky was still overcast, and the sea still ran high, without growing calm, although the wind had fallen. It ceased blowing entirely, yet the waves still dashed on. Then, towards the afternoon, the two boats put out, in spite of everything. At about four o'clock the *Zephyr* returned, having caught nothing; and while Tupain and Brisemotte anchored it in the little harbour, La Queue stood on the beach, shaking his fist at the ocean in his exasperation. Was not M. Mouchel waiting? he said. Margot was there—with half Coqueville, indeed—watching the last billows, and sharing her father's rancour against sea and sky.

'But where's the *Whale*?' asked somebody.

'Down there behind that point,' replied La Queue. 'And if that old tub returns to-day without being smashed, it will be by sheer good luck.'

He spoke in tones of great contempt, and then he allowed it to be understood that it was all very well for the Mahés to risk their lives in that fashion; it didn't so much matter when a man hadn't a copper to call his own; but, for his part, he would rather fail in his promise to M. Mouchel.

All this was said while Margot stood observing the rocks, behind which the *Whale* was supposed to be.

‘Father,’ she said at last, ‘have they caught anything?’

‘They!’ he cried. ‘Not a thing!’

He restrained himself as he caught sight of the Emperor smiling in a jeering way, and then went on more softly: ‘I don’t know whether they have caught anything or not; but as they never do catch anything——’

‘Perhaps, though, they have caught something to-day,’ said the Emperor, maliciously. ‘Such things have happened before now.’

La Queue was on the point of making an angry reply, but Abbé Radiguet came up at that moment, and succeeded in soothing him. He, the Abbé, had just seen the *Whale* from the kind of platform on which the church stood, and the boat seemed to be after some big fish. This news caused great excitement. The group on the beach included both Mahés and Floches; the former wishing that the boat might return with a marvellous catch, and the others praying that it might come in empty.

Margot was standing perfectly erect, attentively watching the sea.

‘Here they are,’ she said quietly.

There was, indeed, a black speck coming round the point, towards which they all turned their eyes. It looked like a cork dancing on the water, and the Emperor, whose eyesight was failing, could not see even that much. It needed a native of Coqueville to recognise the *Whale* and its crew at such a distance.

‘Why,’ cried Margot, who had the best eyes in the village, ‘Fouasse and Rouget are rowing, and the boy is standing in the bows.’

She called Delphin ‘the boy,’ to avoid mentioning his name. After that, however, every one watched the boat



and tried to account for its strange movements. As the priest had said, it appeared to be after some fish which had fled before it. That seemed extraordinary, but the Emperor declared that no doubt the fish had carried the net away with it. Thereupon La Queue exclaimed that they were idle rogues, and were only amusing themselves. They certainly were not fishing for seals! All the Floches laughed at this joke, while the Mahés, in their vexation, protested that Rouget was a plucky fellow, ever ready to risk his life, when others would rather make for land at the least capful of wind. Then Abbé Radiguet again had to interfere, for matters threatened to come to blows.

‘What is the matter with them?’ exclaimed Margot, suddenly. ‘They’ve gone off again.’

Every one then ceased to menace his neighbour, and all eyes were turned to the horizon. The *Whale* was again hidden behind the point, and this time La Queue himself became uneasy. He could not account for such manœuvres, and the fear that Rouget was really catching some fish made him lose all control over himself.

No one left the beach, though there was nothing to be seen, and for two hours the group stood there waiting for the boat, which came just in sight from time to time, and then again disappeared. At last it did not reappear at all, and La Queue in his rage declared that it had gone to the bottom, really wishing that it might be so. As Rouget’s wife happened to be there with Brisemotte, the mayor looked at them both with a chuckle, and patted Tupain on the shoulder to console him for the death of his brother Fouasse. But his laughter ceased when he saw his daughter Margot standing still and silent, gazing out to sea. Perhaps she was looking for Delphin.

‘What are you doing here?’ he scolded. ‘Get back to the house, Margot, and take care what you’re up to.’



She did not move, but suddenly exclaimed : ' Ah ! Here they are ! '

There was a cry of surprise. Margot, who had such good eyes, vowed that she could not see a soul on board, neither Rouget, nor Fouasse, nor anybody ! The *Whale* was running before the wind as if forsaken, tacking at every minute, and lazily rocking from side to side. Fortunately a westerly wind had arisen and was driving the boat towards land, though in a strange, capricious, zigzag fashion. Then all Coqueville came down on to the beach, some calling the others, until there was not a girl left in all the houses to look after the dinners. Some catastrophe had happened, something inexplicable, which turned everybody's head. Marie, Rouget's wife, thought she ought to burst into tears, and did so ; Tupain only succeeded in putting on an air of sorrow. All the Mahés began lamenting, while the Floches tried to behave decorously. Margot had sat down as if her legs had given way under her.

' What are you up to now ? ' cried La Queue, when he found her under his feet.

' I am tired,' she answered quietly.

And she turned her face towards the sea, her cheeks in her hands and her eyes peeping between the tips of her fingers towards the boat which was rocking still more lazily, like a good-tempered craft that has drunk too much.

Different suppositions were still forthcoming. Perhaps the three men had fallen into the water, only, in that case, it seemed odd that they should have all fallen in together. La Queue would have liked to make everyone believe that the *Whale* had gone to pieces like a rotten egg, but the boat was still floating, and people shrugged their shoulders at the mayor's words. Then suddenly the latter remembered that he was the mayor, and he spoke of the formalities

that would have to be gone through, as if the men had really perished.

‘Don’t talk like that!’ cried the Emperor. ‘Do people ever die in such a stupid, senseless fashion? Why, if they had fallen into the water, little Delphin would have been here by now.’

All Coqueville was obliged to own that little Delphin swam like a fish. But then where could the three men be? There were cries of: ‘I tell you they are drowned!’ ‘I tell you they’re not!’ ‘You are a big fool!’ ‘Fool yourself!’ and sundry blows were also exchanged.

Abbé Radiguet had to entreat his parishioners to refrain from quarrelling, and the Emperor proceeded to restore order by pushing everybody about. All this while the boat was dancing on the waves in sight of them; the tide, which was bringing it in, making it salute the shore with a series of long, measured bows. The craft had certainly gone mad.

Margot was still sitting with her cheeks between her hands, watching it. A skiff had just put out from the harbour to go and meet the *Whale*. It was Brisemotte to whom this idea had occurred, for he was too impatient to wait any longer, and wanted to relieve the suspense of Rouget’s wife. Then everyone’s interest became centred in the smaller boat, and voices were raised once more. Well! could Brisemotte see anything? The *Whale* was still coming on, in its mysterious, facetious way, and at last, from the shore, they saw Brisemotte rise and look into the fishing-boat, one of the ropes of which he had caught hold of. All the people on the beach held their breath, but all at once Brisemotte burst out laughing. That was indeed a surprise; what could there be to amuse him?

‘What is it? what is it?’ shouted every one at the top of their voices.

He did not reply, but laughed still louder, and made signs to them that they would soon see for themselves what the matter was. Then, having fastened the *Whale* to his own boat, he towed it to land, and Coqueville was stupefied by a totally unexpected sight.

Rouget, Delphin, and Fouasse were lying on their backs at the bottom of the craft, snoring heavily, and dead drunk. Beside them there was a little barrel staved in, a barrel which they had found full, and the contents of which they had tasted. Whatever it had contained had no doubt been very good, for they had drunk every drop of it except about a pint which had run out, and which was now mixed with some sea-water in the boat.

‘Oh, the pig!’ cried Rouget’s wife roughly, drying her eyes.

‘Well, their catch is something to be proud of,’ said La Queue, affecting great disgust.

‘Well!’ replied the Emperor, ‘people catch what they can, and at any rate they have caught a barrel, while others have caught nothing at all.’

The mayor was greatly put out, but he said no more. All Coqueville was talking; they understood it now. When boats are tipsy they reel about like men, and that one was indeed full of liquor. Half Coqueville thereupon laughed, and the other half gave way to ill-temper—the Mahés thinking the incident very droll, while the Floches deemed it disgusting. Both factions crowded round the *Whale*, their necks stretched out and their eyes wide open to look at those three jubilant-faced men, who slept calmly on, unconscious of the crowd leaning over them. The scolding and the laughter did not disturb them in the slightest degree; Rouget did not hear his wife accuse him of always drinking all that he could lay his hands on, and Fouasse did not feel the stealthy kicks which his brother Tupain was bestowing on his ribs. As

for Delphin, he looked quite pretty when he was drunk, with his fair hair and pink face with its rapturous expression. Margot had risen to her feet, and silently contemplated the lad with an air of severity.

‘They ought to be put to bed!’ exclaimed somebody.

But at that very moment Delphin opened his eyes, and looked around. He was at once assailed with eager questions, which somewhat dazed him, for he was still very tipsy.

‘Well, what’s the matter?’ he stammered. ‘It’s a little cask—there’s no fish, so we caught a little barrel.’

That was all that could be got from him, and at the end of every sentence he added:

‘It was very nice.’

‘But what was there in the barrel?’

‘Oh, I don’t know, but it was very nice.’

Now, everyone was burning with curiosity as to what the liquor might be, and every nose in Coqueville was sniffing at the boat. It was unanimously agreed that it smelt like some liqueur, only nobody could say what liqueur it was. The Emperor, who flattered himself that he had tasted everything possible for man to drink, said that he would soon see, and in the hollow of his hand he gravely scooped up a little of the liquid lying in the bottom of the boat. The crowd stood silently awaiting his verdict, but after the first mouthful he shook his head, as though he had not yet arrived at a conclusion. He tasted the stuff again twice, and became more and more embarrassed and surprised.

‘It’s funny, but I don’t know what it is,’ he was forced to admit. ‘No doubt I should know if there weren’t any sea-water mixed with it, but upon my word it’s funny.’

People looked at each other, for it must be something remarkable if the Emperor himself could not say what it was. All Coqueville gazed at the little empty barrel with respect.



‘It was very nice,’ said Delphin again, who seemed utterly regardless of the people around him.

Then, designating the sea with a broad wave of the hand, he added: ‘If you want any, there’s some more left. I saw any number of little casks—little casks—little casks——’

And he rocked himself to and fro, humming this refrain, and gazing at Margot, whose presence he had only just noticed. She was furious, and raised her hand to give him a box on the ears, but he did not even close his eyes; he awaited the blow with a tender look on his face.

Puzzled as to what the unknown beverage might be, Abbé Radiguet also dipped his finger in the liquid, and then sucked it, but, like the Emperor, he shook his head; no, it was very astonishing, he could not tell what it might be. There was only one point on which every one was agreed, which was that the barrel must have been part of the cargo of the vessel in distress which had been seen on the Sunday evening. English ships often brought liqueurs and wines to Grandport.

The day gradually closed in, and, in the deepening shadows, the crowd withdrew. But La Queue, tormented by an idea he had not revealed, still stood thinking, and as they carried Delphin away he still seemed to hear the lad saying in his sing-song voice, ‘Little casks—little casks—little casks. If you want any there are plenty left.’

### III

DURING the night there came a complete change in the weather, and Coqueville awoke the next morning to a bright sun, a sea as smooth as a huge piece of green satin, and a warm autumn day.



La Queue was the first to rise, his head still full of the dreams of the night. For a long time he gazed at the sea in all directions, and at last he said, with a grumble, that M. Mouchel's wants must after all be satisfied. Then he set off with Tupain and Brisemotte, threatening Margot before he went that he would give her a thrashing if she didn't keep straight. However, when the *Zephyr* had left the harbour, and he saw the *Whale* still swinging at anchor, he became a little better tempered, and cried :

‘ Ah, to-day we've got the start.’

As soon as the *Zephyr* was well out at sea, La Queue dropped his nets overboard, and then went to visit his baskets, which he used more particularly to catch lobsters and red mullet. But, in spite of the calmness of the sea, he found every one empty except the last, at the bottom of which there was a tiny mackerel, which he threw back into the water in a passion. It was regular bad luck ; there were weeks like that when every fish seemed to avoid Coqueville, and it was always during those very weeks that M. Mouchel wanted all that could be caught. La Queue swore roundly when, an hour later, he pulled up his nets and found they contained nothing but a bundle of seaweed. His anger was all the greater since the ocean was perfectly smooth and calm, and lay under the blue sky like a sheet of burnished silver. The *Zephyr* glided so smoothly over the water, that it hardly seemed to be moving at all, and La Queue decided to go back to shore after once more setting his baskets. He would visit them again in the afternoon, and, with awful oaths, he threatened to revenge himself on the Divinity and all the saints should he find them empty.

Meantime Rouget, Fouasse, and Delphin were still asleep, and no one was able to arouse them until just before the mid-day meal. They could remember nothing, being merely conscious that they had regaled themselves

with something strange, with which they had previously been totally unacquainted. That afternoon, as they were all three standing near the water-side, having regained their senses, the Emperor tried to question them. Well, perhaps the stuff they had drunk had been like brandy with liquorice juice in it, or rather, it had resembled sugared rum with a burnt flavour about it. They said yes and no, and from their answers the Emperor suspected that the liquor was ratafia, though he would not have sworn to it. Rouget and his men were all too tired and dazed that day to go fishing; besides, they knew that La Queue had caught nothing in the morning, and so they talked of waiting till the following day before visiting their own traps.

They were all three seated on the rocks half-asleep, and feeling queer from their debauch, when Delphin suddenly jumped to his feet, crying: 'Look there, governor! Over there!'

'What?' asked Rouget, stretching his limbs.

'A barrel.'

The words were hardly out of his mouth before Rouget and Fouasse were on their feet, scanning the horizon with eager glistening eyes.

'Where is it, lad? Where is the barrel?' asked Rouget, excitedly.

'Over yonder, to the left; that black spot.'

At first the others could see nothing, then Rouget muttered an oath.

Amidst an oblique ray of the declining sun he had just seen the barrel, which looked about the size of a bean on the white water, and he at once hastened to the *Whale*, followed by Delphin and Fouasse, who rushed along as fast as their legs would carry them.

The *Whale* was just leaving the harbour when the news that there was a barrel in sight spread through Coqueville.

Men, women, and children ran down to the beach, crying :

‘ A barrel ! a barrel ! ’

‘ Can you see it ? Is the current carrying it to Grand-port ? ’

‘ Oh, yes ; there it is on the left. Come along, there’s a barrel in sight. ’

And Coqueville hastened down from its rock ; the children turning cartwheels on the way, while the women gathered up their petticoats with both hands to get along as quickly as possible. Soon, as on the previous evening, the whole village was on the beach.

Margot had come out for a moment, and had then hastened back to the house to communicate the news to her father, who was just then arguing with the Emperor about some municipal matters. At last La Queue appeared upon the scene white with passion.

‘ Shut up, will you ? ’ he exclaimed to the constable. ‘ Rouget sent you to me to keep me out of the way, but you’ll see that he won’t get the cask this time. ’

When, however, he saw the *Whale* three hundred yards out at sea, rowing as hard as it could go towards the black speck in the distance, his rage increased, and, pushing Tupain and Brisemotte into the *Zephyr*, he in his turn put off, repeating : ‘ No, they shan’t have it. I’ll go to the bottom first. ’

Then Coqueville had the pleasure of seeing an exciting race between the *Whale* and the *Zephyr*. When the former saw the other boat leave the harbour, she understood the danger and made off as quickly as she could go. She may have been about four hundred yards ahead, but the chances were equal, for the *Zephyr* was the lighter and the quicker craft, and thus the excitement on the beach reached a climax. The Mahés and the Floches instinctively formed into two groups, each member supporting his

particular party's boat, while they all eagerly watched the struggle.

At first the *Whale* kept her advantage, but it was soon seen that the *Zephyr* was gradually gaining upon her. Thereupon she made a supreme effort and succeeded for some minutes in again maintaining her distance from her adversary; but again it was diminished, the *Zephyr* drawing near with marvellous rapidity. From that moment it became clear that the two boats would meet just as they both reached the barrel. The victory would depend on an accident, on the slightest mistake.

'The *Whale* wins! The *Whale* wins!' cried the Mahés.

But all at once their cries ceased. The *Whale* was almost touching the barrel, when the *Zephyr*, by a bold manœuvre, succeeded in passing before her and in throwing the barrel to the left, where La Queue harpooned it with a boat-hook.

'Hurrah for the *Zephyr*!' screamed the Floches.

The Emperor said something about cheating, while Margot clapped her hands, and harsh words were exchanged, but Abbé Radiguet, who had come down to the beach, breviary in hand, suddenly quieted his parishioners, throwing them all into a state of consternation by a remark of great profundity.

'Perhaps they'll drink it all up like the others did,' he said with a melancholy look.

Meantime out at sea a violent quarrel was raging between the *Whale* and the *Zephyr*. Rouget stigmatised La Queue as a thief, and the latter retorted by calling the master of the *Whale* a scoundrel. The men even took up their oars to strike one another, and the adventure was within an ace of becoming a naval battle. However, they finally contented themselves with shaking their fists and oars, and threatening to knock all the breath out of one another's bodies the first time they met on land.



'The rogue!' muttered Rouget. 'That cask's bigger than the one we caught yesterday, and it's painted yellow. There must be some capital stuff inside it.'

Then he resumed despondently: 'Let's go and look at the traps. Perhaps we shall find some lobsters in them.'

The *Whale* then went off heavily towards the little promontory on the left.

On board the *Zephyr* La Queue had to exert all his authority to keep Tupain and Brisemotte from the barrel. The boat-hook had broken one of its hoops, and a red liquid was oozing out, which the two men licked off the tips of their fingers and thought delicious. One glass wouldn't make much difference, surely, said they; but La Queue wouldn't hear of it. He stood the cask on end, and declared that the first who touched it would have to deal with him. He would see about giving them some when they had landed.

'Well, then,' asked Tupain, sulkily, 'are we going to take up the traps?'

'Yes, by-and-by. There's no hurry,' answered La Queue.

He himself was looking longingly at the barrel, and he wanted to go back at once to taste its contents; fishing bothered him.

'Bah!' he said after a pause. 'It's getting late, and we had better go back. We'll come again tomorrow.'

They had turned round, giving up all idea of fishing, when suddenly he caught sight of another barrel on his right—a tiny one, which was floating on end, and turning round and round. That settled the question of looking after the nets and baskets. Not a word was said, but the *Zephyr* gave chase to the little cask, which it easily captured.



Meanwhile a similar thing had happened to the *Whale*. Rouget had already visited five traps, and found them empty, when Delphin, always on the alert, cried out that he could see something, but it looked too long to be a barrel.

‘It’s a beam of wood,’ said Fouasse.

Rouget let his sixth lobster-trap drop back before he had quite lifted it out of the water.

‘Well, we’ll go and see what it is, at any rate,’ he replied.

As they advanced, they thought it a plank, a chest, or the trunk of a tree. Then they uttered a cry of delight. It was a cask, but a cask such as they had never seen before. It looked like a pipe swollen in the middle and closed at both ends by a layer of plaster.

‘Oh, isn’t it funny?’ cried Rouget in delight. ‘I want the Emperor to taste this one, so let’s go in, boys.’

They all agreed that they would not touch it, and the *Whale* returned to Coqueville at the very moment when the *Zephyr* was anchoring in the little harbour. Not one of the inquisitive crowd had left the beach, and this unexpected catch of three barrels was hailed with shouts of joy. Boys threw their caps into the air, and the women ran off to get glasses. It was at once decided to taste the liqueurs then and there; all wreckage belonged to the whole village, so that no question of proprietorship was raised, but two groups were formed, the Mahés surrounding Rouget, while the Floches never quitted La Queue.

‘The first glass is for you, Emperor,’ cried Rouget. ‘Tell us what it is.’

The fluid was of a bright golden colour, and the constable raised the glass, looked, smelt, and finally decided to drink.

‘That comes from Holland,’ he said, after a long silence.

He added no other information, but all the Mahés drank reverentially. The liqueur was rather thick, and had a flowery taste which surprised them. The women thought it very nice, but the men would have liked it better 'if it had not been so sweet. However, the more they drank of it the more they appreciated it, and at the third or fourth glass the men began to get merry, and the women funny.

In spite of his recent quarrel with the mayor, the Emperor now went and hung round the Floches. The larger barrel gave forth a dark red liquid, while from the smaller one there came a stream as white as spring water, and so strong and peppery that it burnt the tongue. Not one of the Floches knew what either the red or the white liquid might be, and yet there were some knowing ones among them. It vexed them not to know the name of what they were enjoying.

'Here, Emperor, taste that,' said La Queue at last, thus making the first advance.

The Emperor, who was waiting for the invitation, again posed as a connoisseur.

'There is orange in that,' he said, when he had tasted the red drink. The white he declared to be tip-top stuff.

Every one had to be contented with these answers, for he put on the happy look of a man who has fully satisfied his audience. Abbé Radiguet was the only person who did not seem convinced; he wanted to know the names. According to his own account, he had those names on the tip of his tongue but could not recall them. To help his memory, he drank several glasses one after the other, saying as he did so: 'Wait a minute, I know what it is. I shall be able to tell you presently.'

Meantime the two groups were gradually getting very merry. The Floches, especially, were very gay, for they were mixing the liqueurs. Both Floches and Mahés kept

entirely to themselves and their own barrels, merely casting longing glances at each other, from time to time, for they felt a desire which they would not confess, which was to taste their neighbours' drink, as no doubt it was better than their own. The two hostile brothers, Tupain and Fouasse, stood near each other the whole evening without even shaking their fists, and it was also remarked that Rouget and his wife were drinking out of the same cup. As for Margot, she served the drink to the Floches, and, as she filled the glasses too full and the liqueur ran over her hands, she was constantly sucking her fingers until at last, although obeying her father's injunctions not to drink, she became as intoxicated as a woman vintaging. It rather improved her than otherwise, for her face became a rosy pink, and her eyes shone like candles.

The sun set, but the evening proved mild and spring-like. Coqueville had emptied its casks, and yet it did not think of going in to dinner. It was so pleasant on the beach. When it grew dark, Margot, who sat apart from the others, felt someone breathing on her neck. It was Delphin, who, feeling very lively, was prowling about behind her, like a wolf. She stifled an exclamation so as not to rouse her father, who would have kicked him away if he had seen him.

'Be off, you idiot!' she whispered, half angry, half laughing. 'You'll be caught if you don't!'

#### IV.

COQUEVILLE did not awake on the following day until the sun was well above the horizon. It was warmer even than before, and the sea lay dozing under a cloudless sky; in fact, it was just the sort of day when most pleasure is to be found in remaining absolutely idle.

Until lunch-time Coqueville rested after the treat of the evening before ; then everyone went down to the beach to keep a look-out, and that Wednesday, fishing, Madame Dufeu, and M. Mouchel were all forgotten. La Queue and Rouget did not even speak of going to pull up their baskets. About three o'clock some casks were sighted. Four were dancing on the waves opposite the village, whereupon both the *Zephyr* and the *Whale* gave chase ; but there was no dispute, as there was enough liquor for all, and each boat had its share.

After scouring the little gulf, Rouget and La Queue came back at six o'clock with three barrels each, and once again the festival began. The women carried out some tables, to be more comfortable ; then seats were brought and two open-air *cafés*, such as there are at Grandport, were at once established. The Mahés remained on the left and the Floches on the right, and between them there was a heap of sand. That evening, however, the Emperor went from one group to the other with full glasses in his hands, so that everybody might taste the contents of all six barrels. By nine o'clock the scene was even gayer than on the previous evening ; and the next day, try as it would, Coqueville could not remember how it had managed to get to bed.

On the Thursday, the *Zephyr* and the *Whale* only took two barrels apiece, but those were huge ones. On Friday, the catch was superb and quite surpassed everybody's hopes ; seven barrels were brought to land, three by Rouget and four by La Queue. Then came golden hours for Coqueville. Nobody did any work. The fishermen lay in bed till noon, sleeping off their potations, and then sauntered down to the shore and gazed at the sea. Their only anxiety was as to the kind of liqueur which the tide might bring them, and they stood on the sand for hours, giving shouts of delight as soon as any wreckage appeared.



The women and children, perched on the tops of the rocks, pointed out everything floating on the water, even to the smallest bundle of seaweed, and the *Zephyr* and the *Whale* were always kept in readiness to go out to sea. They set off, tacked about the gulf, fishing for casks as they might have fished for tunny, quite despising the mackerel, which leapt in the sunlight, and the soles, which floated lazily along on the surface of the water. Coqueville meantime watched the fishers from the shore, and burst its sides with laughing ; then, in the evening, the catch was drunk.

What delighted Coqueville most was that the supply of casks did not cease. The wrecked vessel must have had a large cargo, and Coqueville, now selfish and gay, joked about the lost ship, which had been, folks said, a regular wine-cellar, containing enough liquor to intoxicate all the fish in the sea. They never caught two barrels alike ; the casks were of all shapes, sizes, and colours, and each contained a different liquid. The Emperor fell into profound reveries—he, who had drunk everything, could no longer give an opinion ; and La Queue himself declared he had never seen such a cargo. Abbé Radiguet believed it had been destined for some savage king, who had wished to stock his cellar ; but the rest of Coqueville no longer troubled to find out what it was that they were drinking.

The elder ladies preferred the liqueurs flavoured with mocha, peppermint, and vanilla ; and Marie Rouget drank so much aniseed one evening that she became quite ill. Margot and the other young ladies devoted themselves to curaçoa, Bénédictine, Trappistine, and Chartreuse, while the cassis was given to the children. The men were naturally most pleased when the catch included cognac, rum, or gin. A barrel of raki from Chio stupefied Coqueville, for it thought that it had got hold of a cask of turpentine. Of course it was drunk, because it is not right to waste anything ; still it was talked about for a long



time. Batavian 'arrack,' Swedish brandy flavoured with cumin, Roumanian 'tuica calugaresca,' Servian 'sliwowitz,' also upset Coquevillian ideas about what was fit to drink. At bottom was a general leaning towards kümmel and kirsch, liqueurs clear as water and strong enough to kill a man. How could so many good things have been invented? At Coqueville, brandy had been the only spirit known, and all the inhabitants were not even acquainted with that. A veritable worship for the inexhaustible variety of intoxicants began to spring up. Oh, to get drunk every evening on something different, of which even the name was unknown! It all seemed like a fairy tale, in which there was a magic fountain spouting forth strange alcoholic fluids, perfumed and flavoured with all the flowers and fruits in creation.

As has been said already, there were seven barrels on the shore on Friday evening. Coqueville now simply lived there, and, thanks to the mildness of the weather, it could do so with comfort. Never had there been so fine a week in September. The feast had lasted since Monday, and there was no reason why it should not last for ever, if only Providence (for in this affair Abbé Radiguet discerned the hand of Providence) would continue to send them casks. All work was suspended, and everybody for the time being became a gentleman, a gentleman who drank expensive liqueurs without having to pay for them. Coqueville idly thrust its hands in its pockets and basked in the sun, while waiting for the evening carouse. Besides, it was never sober. One after another it tried the delights of kümmel, kirsch, and ratafia. In the course of a week it experienced the anger born of gin, the soft-heartedness coming from curaçoa, and the laughter fomented by cognac. And withal Coqueville retained the innocent ways of a new-born child, knowing nothing about any thing, but thankfully drinking whatever heaven sent it.

It was on the Friday that the Mahés and the Floches at last fraternised. Every one was very merry that evening, and even on the night before the distance between the two groups had been lessened, for the more intoxicated among them had trodden down the heap of sand, and there was now only about a foot of it left between the two parties. The Floches were emptying their four casks, while the Mahés were making an end of three little barrels of liqueurs, the colours of which happened to be the same as those of the French flag—red, white, and blue. The Floches were filled with envy and jealousy whenever they saw the blue liqueur, for the blueness seemed to them something wonderful; and at last La Queue, who had turned quite good-natured now that he was never sober, came forward, glass in hand, thinking that it was his place as mayor to make the first advances.

‘I say, Rouget,’ he stuttered, ‘will you drink with me?’

‘Certainly,’ replied Rouget, whose emotion made him reel.

They fell on each other’s necks, and everybody wept, the scene was so touching! Then the Mahés and the Floches, who had been ready to devour each other for the last three hundred years, kissed and shook each other by the hand; and Abbé Radiguet, who was very much affected, again spoke of the hand of Providence. Finally, they all toasted one another in the red, white, and blue liqueurs, and the Emperor cried, ‘Here’s to France!’

The blue was not up to much, and the white was hardly any better, but the red was really first-rate. The Floches’ barrels were next attacked, and then a dance was got up. As there was no music, some of the young fellows whistled and clapped their hands to keep time, and the girls danced with spirit. The spree was really assuming magnificent proportions. The seven casks were placed side by side, and everyone took what he liked best.

Those who had had enough lay down on the sand and slept for a time, and when they woke up feeling parched they began to drink again. Meantime the number of dancers increased, and the ball was continued until midnight. The waves broke on the beach with a faint murmur, the stars shone in the deep blue sky—it was like the peacefulness of a newly-created world around a tribe of savages intoxicated by their first draught of brandy.

However, when there was nothing left to drink, Coqueville at last went indoors, Floches and Mahés helping one another to the best of their ability, and ending by somehow finding their beds.

On the Saturday, the spree was kept up till nearly two o'clock in the morning. Six casks, two of which were huge ones, had been caught that day, and during the evening Fouasse and Tupain almost came to blows. Tupain, who was very bad-tempered when he got drunk, talked of making an end of his brother, but this quarrel shocked everybody—Floches as well as Mahés. Was there any sense in still disagreeing when the whole village had embraced and forgotten old scores? The two brothers were forced to drink together, and, as they still looked sulky, the Emperor determined to keep his eye on them. However, the Rougets did not get on very well together either. When Marie had drunk some anisette liqueur, she behaved towards Brisemotte in a manner which Rouget was unable to witness unmoved; besides, drink made him affectionate, and he wanted to be loved himself. It was in vain that Abbé Radiguet exhorted them to forgive all injuries; an accident was feared.

'Bah!' said La Queue, 'you'll see, they'll make it up if there's a good catch to-morrow. Your health!'

But La Queue himself was not perfect. He still kept a watch on Delphin, and whenever he saw him near Margot he gave him a kick. This made the Emperor

very indignant, for it was not reasonable to prevent two young people from laughing together ; but La Queue still swore that he would kill Margot rather than give her to the boy. Besides, Margot herself did not want him.

‘ You don’t, do you ? You are too proud to marry a beggar, aren’t you ? ’ he cried.

‘ Yes, papa,’ answered Margot.

On Saturday, Margot drank a great deal of some syrupy liqueur. Nothing so sweet could be imagined, and, as she had no idea of the strength of the beverage, she soon found herself seated on the ground beside the cask. She remained laughing to herself, for she felt as if she were in paradise ; she could see stars around her, and it seemed as if dance-music were being played inside her head. While she was in this state Delphin slipped into the shadow cast by the barrels, and, taking her hand, asked : ‘ Tell me, Margot, will you ? ’

She still smiled and finally answered : ‘ It’s papa who won’t hear of it.’

‘ Oh, that doesn’t matter,’ said the lad. ‘ Old people, you know, are always against it ; but if you are willing——’

And, getting bolder, he dropped a kiss on her neck. She drew up her head, but a little shiver ran down her back.

‘ Have done ! You tickle me,’ she exclaimed.

However, she no longer said anything about boxing his ears ; in the first place, because she would not have been able to do so, her hands felt so lazy, and, secondly, because it seemed nice to her to have her neck kissed. It made her feel deliciously drowsy, like the liqueurs, and after a time she began moving her head, and holding out her chin, like a cat who wants to be caressed.

‘ There, just under the ear,’ she murmured. ‘ Oh, it’s lovely ! ’

They both forgot La Queue, but, fortunately, the



Emperor was on the watch. 'Look there, your reverence,' he said, pointing them out to Abbé Radiguet. 'It would be better to marry them.'

'It certainly would,' answered the priest.

And he undertook to speak to La Queue on the subject the very next day. In the meantime, La Queue had drunk so much that the Emperor and the priest had to carry him home. On the way they tried to talk to him about his daughter, but they could get nothing from him but a grunt. Behind them walked Delphin, with Margot on his arm.

By four o'clock the next day the *Zephyr* and the *Whale* had hooked up seven barrels; by six o'clock the *Zephyr* had found two more, which made nine altogether, and so Coqueville had a merry Sunday. It was the seventh day running that it had got drunk. And the spree was perfect—such a spree as had never been seen before, and would never be seen again. Just mention it in Lower Normandy, and people will answer you with a laugh: 'Ah, yes! We know all about the spree at Coqueville.'

## V

WHEN Tuesday had gone by, M. Mouchel was very much astonished to see neither Rouget nor La Queue arrive at Grandport. What could the rascals be thinking of? The sea was calm, and the catch must have been enormous; perhaps, though, they wanted to bring a big cargo of lobsters and soles all at once, and so he patiently waited until Wednesday.

That day M. Mouchel began to get angry. It must be stated that Madame Dufeu was not a good-tempered woman; at the least thing she flew into a rage, and although Mouchel was a big, strong, handsome fellow, he trembled before her—all the more as he aimed at marrying



her later on, and was always on the alert to anticipate and gratify her wishes, meaning to make up for his present life if he ever became the master. Now, on the Wednesday morning, Madame Dufeu stormed and complained that they were missing the market for want of fish, and she accused Mouchel of running after girls, instead of giving his attention to whiting and mackerel, which they ought to have had in abundance. Thereupon M. Mouchel, in his vexation, shielded himself behind the strange failure of the Coqueville fishers. For a moment, surprise struck Madame Dufeu dumb. What could Coqueville be dreaming about? It had never done such a thing before. Then she declared that she didn't care about Coqueville; that it was M. Mouchel's business to look after the supply, and that she would do so herself if he allowed the fishermen to play the fool with him again. Mouchel heartily wished Rouget and La Queue at the devil; but perhaps, after all, they would come on the morrow.

But on the next day, which was Thursday, neither one nor the other appeared; and M. Mouchel, in despair, went up in the evening to the rocks on the left of Grandport, whence Coqueville and its stretch of yellow sand can be seen. For a long time he gazed. The village seemed perfectly quiet; smoke was ascending from the chimneys, and no doubt the women were getting their dinners ready as usual. When M. Mouchel had ascertained that Coqueville still existed, and that no rock from the cliff had fallen and crushed it, he felt more puzzled than ever. However, just as he was about to go down again, he thought he discerned two black specks in the bay—the *Whale* and the *Zephyr*—whereupon he returned to soothe Madame Dufeu. It was all right; Coqueville was fishing.

The night passed, however, and Friday dawned, but still no news came from Coqueville. M. Mouchel climbed up on the rock a dozen times. He was beginning to lose

his head. Madame Dufeu treated him shamefully, and he could find nothing to say to her. Coqueville still lay basking in the sun, like a lazy lizard, only there was no longer any smoke. The village seemed dead; could all the inhabitants have perished without any one knowing of it? There was, indeed, a black mass moving on the shore; but that might be seaweed thrown up by the waves.

No news on Saturday. Madame Dufeu no longer stormed, but her eyes were fixed and her lips white. M. Mouchel stayed two hours on the rock, feeling an ever-increasing desire to find out for himself the why and wherefore of the village's strange stillness. Those houses, sleeping so quietly in the sunlight, irritated him, and he made up his mind to start off very early on Monday morning, so as to reach Coqueville by nine o'clock.

The village was not within walking distance, but M. Mouchel preferred to go by land so that he might catch it unawares. A vehicle took him to Robigneux, where he left it under a shed, for it would have been dangerous to take it through the ravines. Then he cheerfully set off to walk some seven miles along the most abominable roads imaginable, though they are surrounded by a landscape full of wild beauty. The path—so narrow, that in places three men could not walk abreast—goes winding down between enormous walls of rock; then a little further on it skirts precipices; then the ravine suddenly widens, and through the opening one catches glimpses of the sea. But M. Mouchel was in no mood to admire scenery, and he only swore when the pebbles rolled away from beneath his feet. It was all Coqueville's fault, and he promised himself to call those vagabonds to account! However, while he pondered, he had drawn near the end of his journey, and suddenly as he turned round the last rock he saw the twenty houses of the village perched on the side of the cliff.

Nine o'clock was striking. It might have been June, the sky was so blue and clear ; it was a magnificent day indeed, and there was a soft breeze, which brought with it a pleasant smell of the sea. M. Mouchel turned down the one street which the village possessed, and along which he had so often previously walked, and as he passed Rouget's house he looked in. It was empty. Then he went to Fouasse's, Tupain's, and Brisemotte's. Not a soul was to be found ; all the doors were open, but there was nobody in the rooms. What did it mean ? A slight shiver ran through him. Then he thought of the authorities ; the Emperor would surely be able to tell what had happened.

But the Emperor's house was empty, like the others ! Even the constable was missing ! The deserted village frightened M. Mouchel now. He ran to the mayor's, but there another surprise awaited him ; everything was in a terrible litter, the beds had evidently not been made for three days past, dirty china was lying about and chairs were overturned, as though there had been a fight. M. Mouchel felt thoroughly upset, but he determined to go on to the end, and accordingly visited the church. But there was no priest to be found any more than any mayor. All the authorities, both civil and religious, had disappeared, and Coqueville was utterly forsaken ; there was not even a dog, or a cat, or a fowl about the place. Only emptiness, silence, and slumber remained under the vast blue sky.

It was not astonishing, then, that Coqueville had not brought any fish ! Coqueville had removed, Coqueville was dead, and the police must be informed. M. Mouchel was working himself into a state of great excitement over this mysterious catastrophe, when he thought of going down to the shore, and at the sight he saw there he uttered a cry of amazement. The entire population of the village was lying on the sands. At first he thought there had been a

general massacre, but the deep snores he heard soon undeceived him. Coqueville had kept up the spree so late on Sunday night that it had found it impossible to go to bed; so it had slept on the seashore, lying just where it had fallen round the nine barrels, which were quite empty!

Yes, all Coqueville was snoring there—men, women, old folks, and children. Some were on their backs, others on their stomachs, not one was on his feet. They lay about like leaves scattered by the wind.

The moon, it so happened, had been a new one, and Coqueville, thinking it had blown out its candle, had fallen asleep in the dark. Then day had dawned, and now the sun was shining full on the sleepers' faces, though their eyelids did not even quiver. They were sleeping soundly with a happy expression, in the utter innocence of fuddle. The fowls must have come down early in the morning and pecked at the barrels, for they, too, were lying in the sand, drunk; and there were even five cats and three dogs on their backs, with their paws in the air, tipsy, from having licked the syrup remaining in the glasses.

For a few minutes M. Mouchel walked amidst those sleepers, taking care to tread on nobody. He understood what had happened, for some casks from the wreck of an English vessel had also been washed up at Grandport. All his anger evaporated. What a touching and moral spectacle lay before him! Coqueville reconciled! The Mahés and the Floches lying side by side! For at the last glass the bitterest enemies had embraced one another. Tupain and Fouasse were snoring hand in hand, like brothers incapable of ever again disputing over an inheritance, and the Rouget household formed a most amiable picture, for Marie was sleeping between Rouget and Brisemotte, as if to indicate that henceforth they would all live happily together.

But one group in particular supplied a touching scene of family affection : Delphin and Margot were lying with their arms round one another's necks ; at their feet the Emperor was stretched, as if watching over their security ; then just above them La Queue snored away like a father well pleased at having settled his daughter's future ; while Abbé Radiguet, who had dropped like the others, lay with outstretched arms as though to bless them all.

The spree ended by a wedding a little later on, and M. Mouchel himself married Madame Dufeu, whom he then beat unmercifully. Just mention the affair in Lower Normandy, and people will answer with a laugh : ' Oh, yes ! We know all about the spree at Coqueville.'



## MADAME NEIGEON

EIGHT days have gone by since my father, M. de Vaugelade, allowed me to leave Le Boquet, the mournful old château where I was born, in Lower Normandy. My father has strange ideas about the present times ; he is a good half-century behindhand. However, I am at last living in Paris, which I scarcely knew at all, having simply passed through it on two previous occasions. Fortunately, I am not over awkward in my ways. Félix Budin, my old schoolfellow at the College of Caen, pretended, on seeing me here, that I was superb, and that the Parisiennes would surely dote on me. This made me laugh. But when Félix had left, I caught myself standing before a looking-glass, contemplating my five feet six inches, and smiling at my white teeth and black eyes. Then, however, I shrugged my shoulders, for I'm not conceited.

Yesterday for the first time in my life I spent an evening in a Parisian drawing-room. Countess de P——, who is in some degree my aunt, had asked me to dinner. It was her last Saturday. She wanted to introduce me to Monsieur Neigeon, a deputy for our constituency of Gommerville, who had just been appointed Under-

Secretary of State, and is on the high road, so people say, to become a Minister. My aunt, who is far more tolerant than my father, plainly declared to me that a young man of my age must not sulk with his country, even if its government were republican. She wishes to get me an official appointment.

‘I will undertake to talk to that obstinate old Vaugelade,’ she said; ‘leave everything to me, my dear George.’

Precisely at seven o’clock I reached the Countess’s house. But it seems that people dine very late in Paris. The guests arrived one by one, and some had not yet put in an appearance when half-past seven struck. The Countess informed me with an expression of distress that she had been unable to secure Monsieur Neigeon’s company; he was retained at Versailles<sup>1</sup> by some parliamentary imbroglio. Nevertheless, she still hoped that he might look in for a moment during the evening. As a stop-gap she had invited another deputy of our department, ‘fat Gaucheraud,’ as we call him down there. I knew him already, as we had once gone shooting together.

This Gaucheraud is a short jovial fellow, who has lately let his whiskers grow in the hope of thereby giving himself a serious appearance. He was born in Paris, where his father was a petty solicitor of small means; but, down our way, he has a rich and very influential uncle, whom he somehow prevailed upon to run him as a candidate. I was not aware that he was married; but at table my aunt placed me beside a young fair-haired lady, who looked very pretty and shy, and whom fat Gaucheraud called ‘Berthe’ at the top of his voice.

We were all assembled at last. It was still daylight in

<sup>1</sup> The story dates from the time, subsequent to the Franco-German War, when the French Legislature met at Versailles.

the drawing-room, which looks towards the west, when all at once we entered the dining-room, which had its curtains drawn and was lit up by a chandelier and several lamps. The change seemed very singular, and as we took our seats some remarks were made about the way in which the last dinners of the winter season are saddened by the lingering twilight. My aunt detested it. And the conversation on the subject was kept up: how mournful, said somebody, did Paris look when you drove across it in the waning light on your way to an invitation. I said nothing myself, but I had not experienced any such impression in my cab, though it had jolted roughly over the paving stones for a full half-hour. As a matter of fact, Paris, seen amidst the first gleams of the gaslight, had filled me with a passionate desire to partake of all the enjoyment with which it would presently blaze.

By the time the *entrées* were served, people raised their voices and politics were discussed. I was surprised to hear my aunt expressing political opinions. However, the other ladies were all conversant with State affairs, called prominent men by their names without any such prefix as 'monsieur,' and debated and passed judgment on everything and everybody. In front of me Gaucheraud was taking up an enormous amount of room and talking at the top of his voice whilst steadily eating and drinking. But all those political matters did not interest me; I did not even understand the true sense of many remarks, and so I ended by devoting all my attention to Madame Gaucheraud, Berthe, as I already called her in my own mind for brevity's sake. She was really very pretty. As she sat beside me her ear struck me as being particularly charming: a pretty little rounded ear it was, with light yellowish hair curling around it. She had one of those fair necks, covered behind with little wavy locks which quite upset one. Every now and then, when her shoulders moved, her dress-body, which

was cut very low, gaped a little, and I noticed a supple, feline undulation about her back. I did not admire her profile so much, as it was rather sharp. She talked politics with even greater eagerness than any of the others.

‘Madame, may I pour you out some wine? Shall I pass you the salt, madame?’ I asked, striving to be as polite as possible, forestalling her slightest desires and interpreting her every glance and gesture. She had given me a long look as we sat down to table, as if to judge me once and for all.

‘Politics bore you, do they not?’ she said to me at last. ‘They plague *me* to death. But then one has to talk about something, and nowadays in society politics are the only thing that people care for.’

Then she darted off to another subject.

‘Is Gommerville a pretty place?’ she asked. ‘Last summer my husband wanted to take me to see his uncle there, but I felt frightened and pretended that I was ill.’

‘The country is very fertile,’ I replied; ‘there are some beautiful plains.’

‘Ah! good. Now I know the truth,’ she resumed with a laugh. ‘It is a frightful spot, eh? A perfectly flat country with fields following fields, and ever the same fringes of poplar trees rising up at intervals.’

I wanted to protest, but she had started off again, discussing some proposed law on secondary education with the guest seated on her right hand, a solemn-looking man with a white beard. At last, however, the conversation turned to theatricals. Whenever she leant forward to answer a question asked from the other end of the table, the feline undulations of her neck filled me with emotion. At Le Boquet, amidst the covert impatience of solitude, I had dreamt of a fair-haired beauty, but she was slow of gesture and had a noble face; and Berthe’s mouse-like mien and little curly hair quite revolutionised my dream.

Nevertheless, while the vegetables were being served, I glided into some wild fancies. We were alone, she and I, and I kissed her on the neck and she turned round and smiled at me; whereupon we started together for some very distant land. But the dessert was served, and at that moment she said to me in a whisper, 'Pass me that dish of sweetmeats there, in front of you.'

It seemed to me that there was a caressing softness in her eyes, and the light pressure of her arm on the sleeve of my dress coat gave me a delightful thrill.

'I'm awfully fond of sweetmeats; aren't you?' she resumed, as she nibbled at some candied fruit.

Those simple words stirred me to such a degree that I fancied myself in love with her. As I raised my eyes I noticed Gaucheraud, who had been looking at me while I whispered with his wife. He wore his usual gay expression and smiled in an encouraging manner. The idea of the husband smiling calmed me.

But the dinner was drawing to an end. It did not seem to me that a Paris dinner party sparkled with more wit than one at Caen. Berthe alone surprised me. My aunt having complained of the warmth, the company reverted to their first subject of conversation, discussing the spring receptions, and finally opining that it was only at winter-time that one really dined well. Then we went off to the little drawing-room to take coffee there.

By degrees a great many people arrived. The three drawing-rooms and the dining-room likewise became crowded. I had sought refuge in a corner, and as my aunt passed near me she said to me hurriedly: 'Don't go away yet, George. His wife has arrived. He has promised to fetch her, and I will introduce you.'

She was still talking of Monsieur Neigeon, but I scarcely listened. I had heard two young men near me exchanging hasty remarks which filled me with emotion.



They were standing on tip-toes at a door of the big drawing-room, and at the moment when Félix Budin, my old school-fellow at Caen, came in and bowed to Madame Gaucheraud, the shorter of the two asked the other : ‘Are they still on the same terms ?’

‘Yes,’ the taller one answered, ‘more so than ever. It will last till the winter now. I have never known her keep an admirer so long.’

This did not cause me any particular pang, but I felt hurt in my self-esteem. Why had she told me in so soft a voice that she was fond of sweetmeats ? I certainly had no intention of contending against Félix, yet I ended by persuading myself that those young men had slandered Madame Gaucheraud. I knew my aunt ; she was a person of very rigid principles, and would not suffer women of doubtful repute in her house. Gaucheraud, as it happened, had just sprung forward to greet Félix, whom he tapped in a friendly way on the shoulder whilst eyeing him affectionately.

‘Ah ! here you are,’ said Félix as soon as he discovered me. ‘I came on your account. Well, will you let me pilot you ?’

We remained together in a recess formed by a doorway. I should greatly have liked to question him about Madame Gaucheraud, but I did not know how to do so in an off-hand, indifferent way. Whilst seeking a transition I questioned him about a number of other people for whom I cared nothing at all. He named them to me, and gave precise particulars about each of them. He was, I should say, a Parisian by birth, and had merely spent a couple of years at the college at Caen at the time when his father was Prefect of the Department of Calvados. I found him very free in his language, and a smile appeared on his lips when I asked him for information about some of the women present.

‘Are you looking at Madame Neigeon?’ he suddenly asked me.

To tell the truth I was looking at Madame Gaucheraud. And so, somewhat foolishly, I answered: ‘Madame Neigeon, ah! where is she?’

‘She’s that dark woman yonder, near the chimney-piece. She’s talking with a fair woman in a low dress.’

Near Madame Gaucheraud, indeed, there stood a lady whom I had not previously noticed, and who was laughing gaily.

‘Ah! so that’s Madame Neigeon,’ I repeated.

Then I examined her. It was a great pity that she was dark, for she struck me as being charming, not quite so tall as Berthe, but with a magnificent crown of black hair. Her eyes were both bright and soft. Her little nose, her finely modelled mouth, and her dimpled cheeks indicated a lively and yet thoughtful disposition. Such at least was my first impression. But my views became confused as I looked at her, for I soon saw her laughing more loudly and freely than even her friend.

‘Do you know Neigeon?’ Félix asked me.

‘I? Not at all. My aunt is to introduce me to him.’

‘Oh! he’s a nullity, a downright fool,’ Félix continued. ‘Political mediocrity in all its perfection—one of those stop-gaps that are so useful in parliamentary government. As he does not possess two ideas of his own, and every prime minister can therefore employ him, he figures in the most contradictory ministerial combinations.’

‘And his wife?’ I asked.

‘His wife? Well, you see her. She is charming. If you want to obtain anything from him, pay court to his wife.’

Félix affected some unwillingness to say anything

further. But at last he gave me to understand that Madame Neigeon had made her husband's fortune, and continued watching over the home with a view to its prosperity. All Paris attributed lovers to her.

'And the fair lady?' I suddenly inquired.

'The fair lady,' Félix answered without the faintest show of feeling, 'is Madame Gaucheraud.'

'She is a respectable woman, isn't she?'

'Oh! no doubt she's respectable.'

Félix assumed a serious demeanour, but was unable to preserve it. His smile appeared once more, and I even fancied that I could detect on his features an expression of conceit which annoyed me. The two women had doubtless noticed that we were occupying ourselves with them, for they forced their laughter. I remained alone, a lady having led Félix away, and I spent the evening in comparing Madame Neigeon with Madame Gaucheraud, feeling at once hurt and attracted, failing to understand things aright, and experiencing the anxiety of a man who fears lest he may be guilty of some act of foolishness in venturing into a sphere of which he has no knowledge.

'Neigeon hasn't come; what a nuisance he is!' exclaimed my aunt when she again found me in the same corner by the door. 'But it's always like that. True, it is barely midnight as yet, and his wife is still waiting for him.'

I went round through the dining-room and took up a position at the other door of the *salon*. In this wise I found myself behind the two ladies I have mentioned. Just as I reached the spot I heard Berthe calling her friend 'Louise.' That is a pretty name. Louise was not wearing a low dress. Under her heavy coils of hair I could only see a white strip of neck, but that glimpse of whiteness seemed to me for a moment to be far more fascinating than the exhibition which Berthe was making

of her back. Then, however, I no longer knew what to think; they both seemed adorable, and in the perturbed state in which I found myself it appeared to me impossible to choose between them.

But my aunt was looking for me everywhere. It was already one o'clock.

'Have you changed doors?' said she. 'Well, he won't come. Every evening that man Neigeon has to save France. At all events, I will introduce you to his wife before she leaves. And mind that you are amiable, for that is important.'

Without awaiting my answer the Countess placed me in front of Madame Neigeon, giving her my name and briefly acquainting her with my position. I felt rather awkward, and could scarcely find a few words. Louise waited with that smile of hers on her face, and then, seeing that I remained embarrassed, she simply bowed. It seemed to me that Madame Gaucheraud was looking at me contemptuously. Both rose, however, and withdrew. In the antechamber, used as a cloak-room, a fit of wild merriment came over them. However, their free and easy, bold, masculine ways astonished nobody but me. As they passed, the other men drew back and bowed to them with a commingling of extreme politeness and social goodfellowship which stupefied me.

Félix offered me a seat in his cab. But I escaped from him, for I wished to be alone; and I did not hail any driver, for it pleased me to go on foot through the silence and solitude of the streets. I felt feverish, just as one feels at the approach of some severe illness. Was a passion springing up within me? Like the travellers who pay tribute to new climes, I was about to be sorely tried by the atmosphere of Paris.



## II

It was only this afternoon that I met those ladies again, this time at the Salon de Peinture, which, it so happened, opened to-day. I confess that I knew I should meet them there, and that it would be very difficult for me to pronounce an opinion on the value of the three or four thousand paintings before which I promenaded for four successive hours. Félix had promised me yesterday that he would call for me about noon : we were to lunch at a restaurant in the Champs-Élysées and then repair to the Salon.

I have reflected a great deal since the Countess's *soirée* took place, but I must own that reflection has not brought me much enlightenment. How strange a world is Parisian society, at once so polished and so corrupt ! I am not a rigid moralist, but none the less I feel embarrassed when I think of the fearful things that I heard men saying to one another in my aunt's drawing-room. If one was to believe their muttered comments, more than half the women present were disreputable. How was one to tell the truth amidst all those assertions ? I had at first thought that, in spite of all my father had said on the subject, my aunt really received a very questionable set. But Félix asserted that things were just the same in most Parisian drawing-rooms. Ladies, even the most severely inclined among them, were compelled to show a great deal of tolerance lest they should find their houses forsaken. Then, my first feeling of revolt having calmed down, I simply felt an impulse to snatch at the facile pleasures placed within my reach.

For the last four days I had never awoke in my little flat in the Rue Laffitte without thinking of Louise and Berthe, as I familiarly called them. A singular phenome-



non was at work within me : I ended by confounding them together. I was now certain that Félix was Berthe's lover, but this, instead of wounding my feelings, seemed a kind of encouragement, and though my thoughts and plans remained very vague, I was convinced that I had only to choose between Berthe and Louise to become the master of one or the other.

When we entered the first gallery of the Fine Art show I was amazed at the great crowd that was stifling there.

'The Devil,' muttered Félix ; 'we are rather late. We shall have to use our elbows.'

It was a very mixed throng of artists, *bourgeois* and society people. In the midst of overcoats badly brushed, and frockcoats black and gloomy, there were many light gowns, those spring Paris gowns which look so gay with their soft silk and their bright trimmings. And I was particularly delighted by the quiet assurance of the women, who cut through the thickest of the throng without even a thought of their trains, whose waves of lace always ended by effecting a passage. In this wise they went from one picture to another as if they were simply crossing their drawing-rooms. Only Parisiennes can thus retain a goddess-like serenity in a public crush, as if the words they hear, and the contact they have to put up with, could not possibly reach and soil them. For a moment I watched one lady who Félix told me was the Duchesse d'A——. She was accompanied by two daughters of from sixteen to eighteen years of age ; and the three of them examined a 'Leda' without so much as blinking, whilst a party of young painters behind them made merry over the picture with the greatest freedom of language.

But Félix turned into the left-hand galleries, a succession of large square rooms where the crowd was less compact. A white light fell from the glazed roof, a crude light softened by linen hangings. The dust raised by the

tramping of the people set, as it were, some slight smoke above the sea of heads. The women needed to be very pretty to bear the effect of that light, that uniform tone, with which the paintings on the four surrounding walls contrasted violently. There one perceived an extraordinary medley of colours, reds, yellows and blues all clashing and running riot amidst the bright gold of the picture-frames. It was becoming very warm. Some bald-headed gentlemen with polished glistening craniums puffed as they walked about, hat in hand. Every nose was raised upward. There was quite a crush in front of certain canvases. And one incessantly heard the tramping of feet over the floor boards, accompanied by a vague, endless clamour like the roaring of waves.

‘Ah!’ Félix suddenly remarked to me, ‘there’s the big affair that folks talk so much about.’

People stood, five rows deep, in contemplation before ‘the big affair.’ There were ladies with glasses, artists talking spitefully, and a tall lean gentleman taking notes. But I scarcely gave a glance in that direction, for in a neighbouring room I had caught sight of two ladies leaning against the handrail and inquisitively examining a little picture on the line. At first there was but a flash of thick black tresses and a mass of fair fluffy hair, showing under stylish hats. Then this vision vanished; a wave of the crowd, a sea of heads hid both ladies from my view. But I could have sworn to them. After taking a few steps, I again caught sight now of the fair hair, now of the black tresses between the ever-moving heads in front of me. I said nothing to Félix; I contented myself with leading him into the next room, manœuvring in such wise that it might seem as if he were the first to recognise the ladies. Had he already noticed them, as I had done? I almost believe so, for he gave me a glance full of delicate irony.

‘Ah! what a fortunate meeting!’ he exclaimed as he bowed.

The ladies turned and smiled. I awaited the effect of this second interview: it was decisive. Madame Neigeon quite upset me with a mere glance of her black eyes, whereas I seemed to be simply meeting a friend again in the person of Madame Gaucheraud. This time, then, it was the lightning flash. *She*—Madame Neigeon—was wearing a small yellow hat trimmed with a branch of glycine, and her gown was of mauve silk with trimmings of straw-coloured satin, the whole forming a very soft yet showy toilette. However, it was only later that I really scrutinised her. At the first moment she appeared to me in a blaze of light, as if she scattered sunbeams around her.

But Félix was talking. ‘Nothing remarkable, eh?’ said he; ‘I have seen nothing yet.’

‘It is the same, *mon Dieu*, as it is every year,’ Berthe declared.

Then, turning towards the wall, she added: ‘Look at this little painting which Louise discovered. The gown is so beautifully done! Madame de Rochetaillé wore one exactly like it at the last ball at the Elysée.’

‘Yes,’ murmured Louise, ‘only the *ruches* fell square-wise over the *tablier*.’

They again studied the little picture, which represented a lady standing before a boudoir mantelpiece, reading a letter. The painting seemed to me very commonplace, but somehow I felt full of sympathy for the painter.

‘Why, where is he?’ suddenly asked Berthe, as she looked around her. ‘He loses us at every dozen yards!’

She was speaking of her husband.

‘Oh! Gaucheraud is over yonder,’ quietly exclaimed Félix, who could see everybody. ‘He is looking at that big Christ in sugar-candy, hanging from a gingerbread cross.’

In a peaceful, disinterested way the husband with his hands behind him was indeed making the round of the room on his own account. On catching sight of us he came up to shake hands, and said in his jovial fashion: 'There's a Crucifixion yonder which shows remarkable religious sentiment. Have you noticed it?'

The ladies, however, were walking on. We followed them with Gaucheraud. His presence authorised us to accompany them. We spoke of Monsieur Neigeon, who would no doubt look in at the show if he could only escape early enough from a committee meeting, at which he was to give the Government's opinion on a very important question. Gaucheraud meantime took possession of me with many expressions of friendship. This embarrassed me, for it was necessary that I should answer him. Félix smiled, and gently nudged my elbow, but I failed to understand him. For his part, profiting by the fact that I was keeping the fat man occupied, he walked on in front with the ladies. I only caught snatches of their conversation.

'So you are going to the Variétés this evening?'

'Yes, I have taken a corner box; the piece is said to be amusing. . . . I shall take you, Louise—Oh! I insist on it.'

And further on:

'So now the season is over. The opening of the Salon is the final Parisian solemnity.'

'But you forget the races!'

'Ah! yes, I've an idea of going to the races at Maisons-Laffitte. It's a very pretty place, I'm told.'

Meantime Gaucheraud was talking to me about Le Boquet, a superb estate, said he, the value of which had been more than doubled by my father. I could tell that he was bent on flattery. But I barely listened to him. I was stirred to the depths of my being each time that Louise's long train brushed against me, as she suddenly



stopped before some picture. Under her black hair, her white neck looked as delicate as a child's. However, she retained her masculine ways, which somewhat annoyed me. A great many people bowed to her, and she laughed at them and attracted general attention by her outbursts of gaiety and the quick motions of her skirts. On two occasions she turned round and looked at me fixedly. I walked on as in a dream; I could not say how many hours I followed her in this fashion, dazed by Gaucheraud's chatter and the leagues of paintings which spread out on right and left. I only knew that towards the end we were all chewing dust, and that for my own part I felt horribly fatigued, whereas the women bore up and smiled with all bravery.

At six o'clock Félix carried me off to dinner. And at dessert he suddenly exclaimed: 'I've got to thank you.'

'What for?' I asked him in great surprise.

'Why, for the delicacy you have shown in not paying court to Madame Gaucheraud. So you prefer dark women?'

I could not help flushing, but he hastily added: 'Oh! I don't desire your confidence. You must have noticed that I abstained from intervening. In my opinion, a man ought to make his apprenticeship in life alone.'

He was no longer smiling, but wore a serious, friendly air.

'So you think——' I began.

'I think nothing,' he answered. 'Do as you fancy. You will soon see how things turn out.'

I regarded this remark as a piece of encouragement. Félix had reverted to his ironical tone, and lightly, as if jesting, he pretended that Gaucheraud would have liked to see me fall in love with his wife.

'Oh! you don't know the beggar! You didn't understand why he flung himself so eagerly on your neck. The fact is that his uncle's influence is declining in your dis-



trict, and if he had to face another election he would be heartily glad of your father's support. Well, as you can understand, I felt frightened directly I saw that you might be useful to him, for he has used me up already.'

'But that's abominable!' I exclaimed.

'Why abominable?' Félix resumed in so quiet a fashion that I could not tell whether he was in earnest or not. 'When a woman is bound to have friends, it is just as well that they should prove useful to the home.'

On rising from table Félix talked of going to the Variétés. I had seen the piece there two days previously; but I dissembled, and expressed a keen desire to become acquainted with it. And what a charming evening we spent! The ladies happened to be in a corner box quite close to our stalls. On turning my head I could read on Louise's features the pleasure she took in the actors' jests. A couple of evenings previously I had found those jests idiotic. But they no longer offended me; I enjoyed them, since they seemed to foster a kind of complicity between Louise and myself. It was a very broad piece, and it was at the most questionable passages that she laughed the loudest. Whenever our eyes met amidst the laughter she refrained from lowering them. I could not help thinking that the piece helped on my interests. Truth to tell, the whole house enjoyed itself; many women in the balcony stalls laughed outright, without even indulging in any fan play by way of hiding their blushes.

We went to pay our respects to the ladies during one of the entr'actes. Gaucheraud had just gone out, so we were able to sit down. The box was very gloomy, and I could feel Louise near me. Her skirts were spread out, and at a sudden movement she made they quite covered my knees. It was entrancing to be thus near her. That contact seemed to me like a first, secret avowal, which bound us one to the other.

## III

TEN days have now gone by. Félix has disappeared, and I can devise no pretext that might bring me and Madame Neigeon together again. My only resource is to buy five or six daily papers in which I read her husband's name. He intervened lately in a serious debate in the Chamber, and delivered a speech about which people are still talking. At any other time that speech would have bored me to death, but nowadays it interests me, because it seems as if I could distinguish Louise's white neck and black tresses behind all the verbose phraseology. I have even had a violent discussion about Monsieur Neigeon—whose incapacity I defended—with a gentleman whom I scarcely know. The malicious attacks of the newspapers quite upset me. That man is an imbecile, no doubt, but then this only proves the superior intelligence of his wife, if indeed it be true, as people say, that she has been the good fairy to whom he owes his fortune.

During these ten days of vain impatience and fruitless rambles I have called quite five times on my aunt, ever in the hope of some piece of good luck, some unforeseen meeting. On the occasion of my last call I managed to displease the countess so seriously that it will be a long time before I shall dare to return to her house. She had taken it into her head to procure me an appointment in the diplomatic service by Monsieur Neigeon's influence; and her stupefaction was intense when I refused the offer on account of my political opinions. The worst was that I accepted it originally, that is, before I had fallen in love with Louise, and had come to the conclusion that I could not decently accept any favours from her husband's hands.

My aunt, who had no notion of the motives of delicacy

which actuated me, expressed profound astonishment at what she called my childish capriciousness. Did not many Legitimists, who were quite as scrupulous as myself, represent the Republic abroad? she asked. Indeed, diplomacy was the refuge of the Legitimists. They filled the embassies and rendered useful service to the good cause by keeping possession of high positions which the Republicans envied them.

I was, for good reasons, greatly embarrassed as to how I might answer my aunt, and at last I sought a refuge in ridiculous rigidity of principles, whereupon my aunt ended by calling me a fool, for she felt all the more furious since she had already mentioned the affair to Monsieur Neigeon. But no matter! At all events, Louise will never have cause to think that I court her simply in order to secure a berth from the Government.

People would laugh at me if I were to relate through what a strange succession of feelings I have passed during the last ten days. At first I felt convinced that Louise had noticed the emotion with which she inspired me, and that it was not displeasing to her. Thus conquest on my part seemed quite possible. But on reflection I began to doubt all this. Surely I must be a fool to think that a woman would throw herself at my head so openly and quickly. Madame Neigeon could have no thought of me. It was quite possible that she had already had lovers, but assuredly any intrigue in which she had engaged had been a far more intricate affair than this. There must be a great distance between such a woman as I had dreamt of, a creature of mere elementary passions and instincts, and an artful Parisienne, expert in concealment, such as Louise doubtless was.

Thus she seemed to escape me entirely. I no longer saw her, I no longer knew even if it were indeed true that I had spent five minutes with her in a gloomy box in a

theatre, feeling her palpitate beside me. And I became very wretched—to such a point, in fact, that for a moment I thought of hurrying back to Le Boquet and shutting myself up there.

But on the day before yesterday there came to me an idea which I was astonished at not having had before. It was to attend a sitting of the Chamber. Perhaps Monsieur Neigeon would speak, perhaps his wife would be there. But it was written that I was not yet to set eyes upon that singular man. Though it had been decided that he should speak, he did not even put in an appearance. It was related that he had been detained by some committee business at the Senate. On the other hand, as I was sitting down in the rear of one of the galleries I experienced keen emotion, for I perceived Madame Gaucheraud in the front row of the gallery facing me. She saw me and looked at me with a smile. Louise, alas ! was not with her. My delight fell. On leaving, however, I contrived to meet Madame Gaucheraud in a passage. She displayed a familiar manner. Félix had certainly spoken to her about me.

‘Have you been absent from Paris ?’ she inquired.

I remained speechless, indignant at such a question. Absent ! when I had been scouring the city so furiously !

‘Well, one meets you nowhere !’ she resumed. ‘The last reception at the Ministry was superb, and the Horse Show was marvellous.’

Then, noticing my expression of despair, she began to laugh.

‘Well, till to-morrow,’ she said, as she walked away. ‘We shall see you over yonder, shan’t we ?’

I answered ‘Yes’ in a stupid fashion, never daring to ask a question for fear that I might again hear her laugh. She had turned round, and looked at me with a malicious expression. ‘Come,’ she murmured, in the discreet tone



of a friend who has some pleasant surprise in store for one.

A wild impulse came upon me to run off after her and question her. But she had already turned into another passage, and I bitterly reproached myself with my foolish pride, which had prevented me from acknowledging my ignorance. I was certainly quite ready to go 'yonder;' but where might 'yonder' be? The vagueness of the appointment tortured me, and at the same time I felt ashamed at not knowing what everybody else seemed to know. In the evening I hastened to Félix's rooms, with the view of skilfully extracting from him the information which I needed. But Félix was not at home. Then, in my grief, I plunged into the perusal of the newspapers, selecting those which gave the most society news, and striving to guess, amongst the announcements for the morrow, what spot *le bon ton* would select as a meeting-place. But my perplexity increased, for all sorts of functions were announced: an exhibition of paintings by some of the old masters, a charity bazaar at a big club, a musical mass at Sainte-Clotilde, a general rehearsal, two concerts, the veil-taking of an aristocratic novice, without mentioning horse races in all sorts of directions. How could a new arrival in Paris, a provincial conscious of his shortcomings, hope to arrive at the truth amidst such confusion! I understood perfectly well that the proper thing was to attend one of those functions, but which one was it, O heaven? Finally, at the risk of wandering about all day consumed with vain impatience if I were mistaken, I dared to make a choice. It occurred to me that I had heard the ladies speak of the races at Maisons-Laffitte, and, an inspiration coming to me, I resolved to repair thither. This decision taken, I began to feel calmer.

What a delightful stretch of country is that formed by the environs of Paris! I was not acquainted with



Maisons-Laffitte, which charmed me with its houses so gay of aspect, built on a slope which borders the Seine. Now that we have reached the first days of May, the apple-trees, which are all white, look like big bouquets amidst the tender greenery of poplar and elm.

At first, however, I quite lost my bearings between the walls and the quick-set hedges, for I was unwilling to ask anybody the way. On seeing a great many people take the same train I had felt overjoyed, but the ladies were not there, and as I scanned the passers-by in Maisons-Laffitte itself my heart contracted. I was really losing myself alongside the Seine, beyond all the houses, when all at once keen emotion brought me to a standstill, near a big tuft of nettles. A group of people, still some fifty yards away, was slowly coming towards me, and I recognised Louise and Berthe. Gaucheraud and Félix, those inseparables, followed them at a distance of a few paces. So I had guessed rightly! This filled me with pride. But my emotion was so great that I behaved like a nin-compoop. I hid myself behind the tall clump of nettles, full of a nameless shame, dreading lest I should appear ridiculous. When Louise passed, the hem of her skirt brushed against the bushes. However, I at once realised the folly of my first impulse. And so I made all haste to cut across the fields, and as the others reached a bend in the road I came up in the most natural manner possible—like a man, indeed, who thinking himself alone is yielding to the dreamy mood inspired by the open air.

‘Oh! is it you?’ cried Gaucheraud.

I bowed, affecting extreme surprise. We all raised exclamations and shook hands. But Félix laughed in his singular fashion, whilst Berthe positively winked at me, thereby establishing additional complicity between us. As we walked on, I remained for a few seconds with her, behind the others.

‘ So you have come ? ’ she said to me gaily, in an undertone.

And without giving me time to answer, she began to jest, saying that I was very happy in still being so young. I felt that I had an ally in her ; it seemed to me that she would have been well pleased to help me with her friend. Then as Félix turned round to inquire, ‘ What are you laughing about ? ’ she replied in all tranquillity : ‘ Oh, Monsieur de Vaugelade has been telling me of his journey in the company of a whole family of English tourists.’

Gaucheraud, however, had again taken Félix by the arm, and was leading him off as if to avoid troubling my *tête-à-tête* with his wife. I remained between her and Louise, and spent a most entrancing hour on the shady road which followed the banks of the Seine. Louise was wearing a light silk gown, and her sunshade with its pink lining steeped her face in a warm, shadowless glow. Here in the country there was more freedom than ever in her demeanour ; she talked in a loud voice, and looked me full in the face whilst replying to Berthe, who turned the conversation to rather venturesome subjects with a pertinacity which greatly struck me later on.

‘ Give Madame Neigeon your arm,’ she ended by saying to me. ‘ You are certainly not gallant ; you can surely see that she is tired.’

I offered Louise my arm and she leant on it at once. Then, Berthe having joined her husband and Félix, we two remained together more than forty paces behind. The road ascended the slope, and we walked very slowly. Down below flowed the Seine between meadows stretching out like carpets of green velvet. There was a long slender island, too, intersected by two bridges, over which the trains rushed with a noise like distant thunder. Then across the water there was a vast cultivated plain stretching to Mont Valérien, whose grey buildings could be seen

amidst a dust of sunshine on the very fringe of the sky. But what affected me almost to tears was an odour of springtide, spreading all around us as it rose from the herbage on either side of the road.

‘Shall you soon go back to Le Boquet?’ Louise asked me.

I was foolish enough to answer ‘No,’ for I did not foresee that she would add: ‘Ah! that’s annoying, for next week we are going to Les Mûreaux, my husband’s property, which is only some two leagues from your place, and my husband meant to ask you to call and see us there.’

At this I began to stammer that my father might possibly recall me sooner than I had expected. It had seemed to me that I could feel her arm pressing my own. Was she giving me an assignation, then? With the ideas that I had formed of this Parisienne, so free and coquettish in her ways, I at once built up a perfect romance: an intrigue in the country, a whole month of passion under the trees. Yes, it was doubtless thus; she found in me the qualities of a young squire, and would grant me her love amidst suitable surroundings.

‘I have to scold you,’ she suddenly resumed, assuming an affectionate, almost maternal manner.

‘How is that?’ I murmured.

‘Yes, your aunt has spoken to me about you. It seems that you will not accept anything from us. That is very discourteous. Why do you refuse—tell me?’

I blushed again; I was on the point of making a declaration, of exclaiming, ‘I refuse because I love you.’ But she made a gesture as if she understood my intention and wished me to remain silent. And then she added with a laugh: ‘If you are proud, if you wish to render service for service, we will willingly accept your protection over yonder. You know that a General Councillor<sup>1</sup> has to

<sup>1</sup> The French equivalent for the English County Councillor.

be elected. My husband is a candidate, but he fears defeat, which in our position would be very unpleasant. Will you help us ?'

It was impossible to be more charming. That election story seemed to me to be a mere pretext devised by a clever woman to enable us to meet again in the country.

'But certainly I'll help you,' I answered.

'And if you succeed in getting my husband returned, it is understood that he in his turn will give you a helping hand.'

'It is a bargain.'

'Yes, a bargain.'

She offered me her little hand, and I tapped it, as the custom goes, by way of sealing our agreement. We made merry together. It really seemed to me most delightful. We had passed the last of the trees, the sunlight streamed down on the crest of the hill, and we walked on, silent, amidst the great heat. But of course that imbecile Gaucheraud must come to disturb that quivering silence under the flaming sky. He had heard us mention the General Council, and he gave me no more peace, but began to tell me all about his uncle, and to manœuvre for an introduction to my father. At last we reached the race ground. They found the races superb. For my part, I stood all the time behind Louise, looking at her delicate neck. And how delightful was the return homeward after a sudden shower ! Beneath the rain the greenery had become softer still, the leaves and the earth sent forth a delightful smell, the very scent of love. Louise half closed her eyes, as if tired and penetrated by all the voluptuousness of spring-time.

'Remember our bargain,' she said to me at the railway station, as she entered her carriage which was waiting there. 'At Les Mûreaux in a fortnight's time, eh ?'

I pressed the hand she offered me, and I fear that I must have been a little rough, as for the first time I saw her



become grave, with two little creases as of displeasure about her lips. But Berthe still seemed bent on encouraging me to be bold, and Félix retained his enigmatical smile, whilst Gaucheraud slapped me on the shoulder, exclaiming, 'At Les Mûreaux in a fortnight, Monsieur de Vaugelade. We shall all be there.'

The devil take him !

#### IV

I HAVE just come back from Les Mûreaux, and such contradictory ideas and impressions fill my mind that it is needful I should recapitulate the day I have spent with Louise in order to arrive at a clear opinion.

Although the estate of Les Mûreaux is only two leagues from Le Boquet, I knew little of that part of our district. Our own shooting is in the direction of Gommerville, and, as a rather long round has to be made to cross the little Béage river, I had not gone there a dozen times in my life. Yet the slope is delightful, with its climbing road edged by big walnut-trees. Then, after reaching the plateau you dip down again, and Les Mûreaux lies at the entry of a dale, whose slopes soon contract into a narrow gorge. The house, a square building of the seventeenth century, is of no great importance, but the grounds are magnificent, with their broad lawns and the snatch of forest land at the far end—such a tangle of trees that the very paths are barred by the branches.

When I arrived on horseback two big dogs greeted me with a prolonged barking and jumping. At the end of the avenue I caught sight of a white spot. It was Louise in a light gown and a straw hat. She did not come down to meet me, but remained motionless and smiling on the large flight of steps that leads to the hall. It was nine o'clock at the latest.

‘ Ah, how nice of you ! ’ she called to me ; ‘ you, at all events, are an early riser. I am the only one up at the château, as you see.’

I complimented her, saying that for a Parisienne she was really courageous. But she added with a laugh : ‘ It is true that I have only been here five days. I would get up with the chickens the first mornings. Only, as soon as the second week arrives, I gradually relapse into my sluggardly ways and end by coming down at ten o’clock, the same as in Paris. This morning, however, I am still a countrywoman.’

I had never seen her looking so charming. In her haste to leave her room she had negligently knotted her hair, and slipped into the first morning wrap she found. And with her eyes still moist with sleep and her cheeks quite fresh she seemed a young girl again. Some little locks of hair were waving over her neck, and whenever her broad sleeves gaped I could see her bare arms as far as the elbows.

‘ Do you know where I was going ? ’ she resumed. ‘ Well, I was going to inspect a screen of convolvuli on that arbour yonder. It is marvellous, it seems, when the sun has not yet closed the flowers. The gardener told me of it, and as I missed the sight yesterday, I don’t want to do so to-day. You will come with me, won’t you ? ’

I felt a great inclination to offer her my arm, but I understood in time that it would be ridiculous. She ran on like a school-girl enjoying a holiday. On reaching the arbour she gave a cry of admiration. From aloft hung quite a drapery of convolvuli, a shower of little bells, pearly with dew, and of delicate hues ranging from vivid rose colour to violet and pale blue. The whole suggested one of those phantasies of exquisite grace and strangeness that one finds in Japanese albums.

‘ This is one’s reward when one gets up early,’ said Louise merrily.

Then she sat down under the arbour, and on seeing that she drew back her skirts to make a little room, I ventured to place myself beside her. I was in a state of keen emotion, for the thought had come to me of bringing matters to a crisis by catching her round the waist and kissing her on the neck. I felt well enough that such roughness was better suited to a young lieutenant dealing with a housemaid, but I could think of nothing else. I don't know whether Louise understood what was passing in my mind; but though she did not get up, her face assumed a very grave expression.

'First of all, shall we talk of our business?' said she.

There was a buzzing in my ears, but I tried to listen to her. It was dim and rather cold in the arbour. Sparks of golden sunshine came in here and there between the foliage of the convolvuli, and on Louise's white wrap they looked like golden flies, golden insects, settling there.

'Well, what is the position?' she asked me with the air of an accomplice.

I thereupon told her of the singular change which I had noticed at my father's. He, who for ten years had never ceased railing at the new state of things and had forbidden me to serve the Republic, had now given me to understand, on the very evening of my return, that a young man of my age owed duty to his country. I suspected my aunt of having effected this conversion. Some women must have been set on him. Louise smiled as she listened, and she ended by saying: 'I met Monsieur de Vaugelade three days ago at a neighbouring château where I was making a call. We had a little conversation.'

Then she quickly added: 'You know that the election for the General Council will take place next Sunday. You must start on your campaign at once. With your father's help my husband's success will be certain.'

‘Is Monsieur Neigeon here?’ I inquired after some slight hesitation.

‘Yes; he arrived last night. But you won’t see him this morning, for he has gone off in the direction of Gommerville to take *déjeuner* with a friend, a landowner who has a good deal of influence.’

She rose up, but I remained seated for yet another moment, deeply regretting that I had not kissed her on the neck, for never should I again find such a dim little nook and such an early propitious hour. It was too late now, and I understood so thoroughly that I should simply make her laugh by falling at her feet on the damp ground, that I put off my declaration till a more favourable moment.

Besides, I had just perceived Gaucheraud’s bulky silhouette at the end of the path. On seeing Louise and myself come out of the harbour he gave a little sneer. Then he expressed astonishment at our courage in rising so early. For his part, he had only just come down.

‘And Berthe?’ Louise asked him; ‘did she sleep well?’

‘Well, I really don’t know,’ he answered; ‘I haven’t seen her yet.’

Then, noticing my astonishment, he explained that his wife had a headache for the whole day whenever she was disturbed in the morning. And he added that they had long found it most convenient to have separate rooms, one for him and one for her. I must confess that this gave me food for thought. I recalled all manner of stories that I had heard and read of Parisiennes in country houses, and when I saw Berthe and my friend Félix come together out of the hall, I could not help thinking that my surmises might be true.

I shook hands with Félix; and, I can hardly account for it, but by the smile which Louise and Berthe exchanged whilst Gaucheraud stood by, quietly whistling, the idea



occurred to me that Louise was not ignorant of the matter I have referred to. And more than ever now I regretted not having kissed her while we were in the dim little arbour.

We had *déjeuner* at eleven o'clock. After the meal Gaucheraud took himself off for his siesta. He had unbosomed himself to me, telling me that he feared he might not prove successful at the next elections, and that he proposed remaining three weeks in the district in the hope of gaining support. Thus, after staying with his uncle, he had desired to spend a few days at Les Mûreaux in order to show everybody that he was on the best of terms with the Neigeons, for this, in his opinion, might win him a good many votes. I understood that he was also extremely desirous of being invited to my father's. Unfortunately, it seemed that I did not care for fair-haired women.

I spent a very gay afternoon with the ladies and Félix. Château life, with Parisian graces frolicking in the open air amidst the sunshine of early summer, is really charming. The drawing-room spreads out over the lawns. It is no longer the winter drawing-room, where you are virtually cooped up, where the women in low dresses ply their fans while the men in black swallow-tails stand up alongside the walls. It is a kind of holiday drawing-room, with women in light garb scampering freely hither and thither, while the men in their short jackets show themselves amiable and natural: a setting aside, as it were, of society etiquette, a familiarity which banishes the boredom born of the stereotyped conversation that one hears at the winter gatherings. Nevertheless, I must confess that the behaviour of the ladies still surprised me, reared as I was in the provinces among pious folk. When we took coffee on the terrace after *déjeuner*, Louise allowed herself a cigarette, and Berthe talked slang in the most natural manner possible. Later on they took themselves off amidst a great rustling of skirts, and one

heard them laughing in the distance, and calling one another, full of a flightiness which greatly disturbed me. It is foolish to own it, but these manners, so novel to one like myself, made me hope that Louise would give me an early assignation. As for Félix, he quietly went on smoking cigarettes, but at times I caught him looking at me in his almost sarcastic way.

At half-past four I spoke of leaving. But Louise immediately protested : ' No, no ; you can't go yet. I shall keep you to dinner. My husband will certainly come back, and then you will see him. Really, now, I must introduce you to him.'

I explained to her that my father was expecting me. I was compelled to be present at a dinner he was giving at Le Boquet, and with a laugh I continued : ' It is an election dinner ; I have got to work for you.'

' Oh ! in that case,' said she, ' make haste. And if you succeed, you know, come for your reward.'

It seemed to me that she blushed as she spoke those words. Did she simply refer to the appointment in the diplomatic service which my father is urging me to accept ? I thought I might attribute another meaning to her words, and no doubt I assumed a very conceited air, for all at once, for the second time, I saw her become very grave, with those little creases about the lips which gave her such an expression of proud displeasure.

But I had no time to reflect upon that sudden change of expression. As I was starting a little conveyance drew up before the house steps. I already imagined that the husband had returned. But there were only two children, a little girl about five, and a little boy of four, in the vehicle, accompanied by a maid. They stretched out their arms and laughed, and as soon as they could spring to the ground they threw themselves among Louise's skirts. She kissed them on the hair.

‘ Whose pretty children are these ? ’ I asked.

‘ Why, mine,’ she replied with an air of surprise.

Hers ! I cannot express in words what a blow that simple answer dealt me. It seemed to me as if she were all at once escaping from me, as if those little beings with puny hands were digging an impassable abyss between her and me. What ! she was a mother, and I had known nothing of it ! I could not restrain the cry : ‘ So you have children ? ’

‘ No doubt,’ she quietly responded. ‘ They went to see their godmother, two leagues from here, this morning. Allow me to introduce them, Monsieur Lucien, Mademoiselle Marguerite.’

The little ones smiled at me. I must have looked very stupid. No, I could not accustom myself to the idea of it. It upset all my notions. I went off with my head in a whirl, and even at this moment I don’t know what to think. I see Louise in the arbour draped with convolvuli, and I see her kissing the hair of Lucien and Marguerite. Decidedly, those Parisiennes are far too intricate for provincials like me. I must get to sleep. I will try to understand things to-morrow.

## V

THIS is the finish of my adventure. Oh, what a lesson ! But let me try to relate things calmly.

Last Sunday Monsieur Neigeon was elected as General Councillor. After the counting of the votes it became evident that without our support he would have failed. My father, who, for his part, has seen Monsieur Neigeon, gave me to understand that a man of such utter mediocrity was not to be feared. Besides, it was a question of beating a Radical candidate. However, after dinner in the evening the old Adam reappeared in my father and he contented himself with saying to me :

‘All that is not very clean business. But everybody repeated to me that I was working for you. Well, do what you think fit. For me the only course left is to take myself off, for I no longer understand things.’

On the Monday and Tuesday I hesitated about going to Les Mûreaux. It seemed to me that it would be bad taste to go in search of thanks so quickly. The thought of the children no longer inconvenienced me. I had persuaded myself that there was very little motherliness about Louise. Besides, did not people say in our part of the country that the Parisiennes never allowed children to interfere with their amusements, but handed them over to the care of servants, so as to enjoy perfect liberty themselves? So yesterday, Wednesday, all my scruples disappeared. I was consumed with impatience, and set off for the battle at eight o'clock in the morning.

My plan was to reach Les Mûreaux as on the first occasion, at an early hour, so as to find Louise alone. But when I dismounted from my horse, a servant told me that Madame had not yet left her room, and made no offer to go and warn her of my arrival. . So I simply replied that I would wait.

And, indeed, I waited two long hours. I don't know how many times I made the round of the flower-beds. Every now and again I raised my eyes to the first-floor windows, but the shutters remained closed. Tired, enervated by this long promenade, I ended by sitting down in the bower of convolvuli. The sky was overcast that morning, and the sunshine did not glide in golden dust between the foliage. It was almost night, indeed, amidst the verdure. I reflected, resolving that I must risk everything. I was convinced that if I should again hesitate I should lose Louise for ever. As soon as I should be alone with her I would take hold of her hands and affect great emotion so as not to frighten her too much, but afterwards I would kiss her on the neck, as I had thought of



doing on the former occasion. I was for the tenth time perfecting my plan when all at once Louise herself appeared before me.

‘Where are you hiding?’ she gaily called, looking for me in the dark arbour. ‘Oh! you are here, are you? I have been hunting for you for the last ten minutes. I must apologise for having kept you waiting.’

Somewhat huskily I answered that there was nothing unpleasant in having to wait when one’s thoughts were of her.

‘I warned you,’ she replied, without paying attention to my silly compliment, ‘that I’m not a country woman for more than the first week. I’ve now become a Parisienne again, and can no longer leave my bed.’

She had remained at the entrance of the arbour, as if she did not wish to risk herself amidst the gloom falling from the foliage.

‘Well, aren’t you coming?’ she ended by asking me. ‘We have to talk, you know.’

‘But one is very comfortable here,’ said I, in a quivering voice. ‘We can talk on this bench.’

She again hesitated, just for a second, then bravely replied: ‘Oh! as you like. It is rather dark here, still we don’t need to see our words.’

Thereupon she sat down near me. I felt like fainting. So the fateful hour had come! Yet another minute and I should take hold of her hands. She, however, still perfectly at ease, continued chatting in her clear voice, in which there was not the faintest sign of emotion.

‘I won’t thank you in ready-made phrases,’ said she. ‘You have given us good help, without which we should have been beaten.’

I was in no condition to interrupt her. I was trembling, and exhorting myself to be brave.

‘Besides, there is no need of words between us,’ she resumed. ‘We concluded a bargain, you know.’

She laughed as she said this, and her laugh suddenly

emboldened me. I caught hold of her hands and she did not withdraw them. I could feel them so little and so warm in my own. She surrendered them to me in a friendly, familiar way, whilst repeating : ' Yes, that is so, isn't it ? And now it is my turn to carry out my part of the agreement.'

Thereupon I suddenly became audacious and rough, drawing her hands towards my lips. The gloom had increased ; a cloud must have been passing over us, and the strong scent of all the plant-life around us intoxicated me in that nest of foliage. But before my lips could reach her, she freed herself with a nervous strength which I should never have suspected, and in her turn caught me roughly by the wrists. And she held me like that without any show of anger, her voice remaining calm, though it assumed somewhat of a scolding tone.

' Come, no childishness,' said she. ' This is what I feared. Will you allow me to give you a lesson whilst I hold you here, in this little corner ? '

She showed the smiling severity of a mother reprimanding a boy.

' I understood you from the very first day. You had been told horrors about me, had you not ? And so you conceived fancies which I forgive you, for you know nothing of our sphere of society. You landed in Paris with the ideas of this wolfish region, and perhaps you may say that it is in some measure my fault if you made a mistake. I ought to have stopped you, for you would have withdrawn at a word from me. That's true, and I did not speak that word ; I let you go on and you must regard me as an abominable coquette. Do you know, however, why I did not speak that word ? '

I began to stammer. The strangeness of the scene paralysed me with astonishment. She held my wrists yet more tightly and shook me, whilst remaining so close to me that I could feel her breath on my face.

‘I did not say it, because I felt interested in you and wished to give you this lesson. Young men fresh to the world form very erroneous and foolish ideas of women. You don’t understand, as yet, but you will reflect and guess. We women are very much slandered. Perhaps we do all that is needed to bring that about. Only, you see, there are some who are perfectly virtuous even amongst those who seem to be the wildest and most compromised. All that is a very delicate matter; but, I repeat, you will reflect and end by understanding.’

‘Let me go,’ I murmured in confusion.

‘No, I will not let you go. Beg my pardon, if you wish me to do so.’

In spite of her jesting tone I could feel that she was growing irritated, that tears of anger were rising to her eyes beneath the affront she had received from me. Within me was springing up a feeling of esteem, of genuine respect for that woman who was at once so charming and so capable. Her amazonian grace in virtuously enduring her husband’s imbecility, her blending of coquetry and rigour, her disdain for evil tittle-tattle, and her skill in playing the man’s part in the household amidst seeming flightiness of conduct—all made her a very complex creature, and filled me with admiration.

‘*Pardon!*’ I humbly said.

She released me. I at once rose to my feet whilst she remained quietly seated on the bench, fearing nothing more from the dimness or the disturbing odour of the greenery. And it was in her usual gay voice that she said to me: ‘Now, let us come back to our bargain. As I am very honest, I pay my debts. Here is your appointment as a junior diplomatic secretary. I received it last night.’

Then, seeing that I hesitated to take the envelope which she held out to me, she exclaimed with just a touch of irony: ‘Well, it seems to me that you may well be my husband’s *obligé*, now.’

Such was the finish of my first adventure. When we came out of the harbour Félix was on the terrace with Gaucheraud and Berthe. He pursed his lips as he saw me approach carrying my nomination. He was doubtless aware of everything, and thought me a fool. I took him aside and reproached him bitterly for having allowed me to perpetrate such a blunder, but he answered that experience alone can form young men. And when with a gesture I designated Berthe, who was walking in front of us, by way of questioning him also about her, he shrugged his shoulders with a significance which was extremely clear. Matters being like this, I must confess that in spite of everything I do not yet fully understand the strange morality of society in which the most respectable women show such singular complaisance towards others.

But the last blow was to learn from Gaucheraud himself that my father had invited him and his wife to spend three days at Le Boquet. Félix again began to smile as he announced that for his part he was returning to Paris on the morrow.

Thereupon I ran off, pretending that I had positively promised my father that I would be home for *déjeuner*. I was already at the end of the avenue when I perceived a gentleman in a gig. It must have been Monsieur Neigeon. No matter! I prefer having again missed him. It is on Sunday that Gaucheraud and his wife are to arrive at Le Boquet. What a horrid nuisance!

THE END





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